

August H. Konkel (Ph. D.)
Providence College and Theological Seminary
Otterburne, MB

PFI Convocation
Toronto, Ontario
August 7, 9, 2003

Biblical Understanding of Justice and Mercy

Justice and mercy are the very essence of understanding the character of God. They must be understood truly, or an understanding of God will be distorted. At the same time they cannot be understood fully, for they are in some sense the antithesis of each other. To demand justice is to leave no place for mercy; to grant mercy is to yield justice.

Justice and mercy have their meeting place in the cross. The words “father forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34) are an expression of mercy from the one who knowing no sin died for the sins of the world.

1. The Mercy of God

The story of the Golden Calf (Exodus 32-34) reveals the meaning of the name of God (Yahweh). The name means “I/he will be” (from the Hebrew verb *hayah*). The significance of this name is repeated twice: Exodus 33:19; 34:6. The significance of the name of God is celebrated in Psalms of mercy; Psalm 103:8 is a well known quotation of the name.

The story of the prophet Jonah is dedicated to understanding the mercy of God. Jonah confesses that the reason he fled from the LORD was because he knew God all too well as the God of mercy. Jonah quotes Exodus 34:6 in Jonah 4:2. Jonah found the mercy of God unacceptable when it came to forgiving the brutal acts of the Assyrians against Israel.

2. The Justice of God

The mercy of God can only be understood in the context of the justice of God. Justice is revealed in the giving of the covenant at mount Sinai. In Exodus 19-24 the name of God signifies relationship; “he will be” with his people in the covenant (19:5). The summary of the covenant is “I took you to be a people to me, and I will be to you a God, and you will know that I am Yahweh” (Exod. 6:7).

2.1 The Foundation of Justice

The ten words (Exod. 20:1-17) establish God as the one who determines what is just. Justice begins with God as the source of life. All violation of life is a violation against God who gave life. Offences are against God, and those that God has made in his image to represent him. Offences are not against the state or society.

The king is equal with the people under the covenant. The king does not establish law but is himself under the law that is established by God. It is his duty to be sure that the law is upheld, and it is his duty to keep the law (Deut. 17:14-20).

The Israelite concept of law sets it apart from all other societies of its time. In Mesopotamia law is ultimately a force of the universe (*kittum*) that has power over gods and humans. The gods attempt to live in harmony with this force, but are subject to it and sometimes overpowered by it. The gods give kings laws, and the king gives the law to the people. The king enforces the law as he sees fit.

2.2 The Concept of Justice

2.2.1 Justice is Never Revenge

The immediate result of rebellion against God in Genesis is to regard revenge as good (Gen. 4:23-24). This brought the world to the verge of self-destruction in the flood. As the apostle Paul pointed out, the principle of the Old Testament is that only God can exercise revenge (Romans 12:19-20; Leviticus 19:18; Proverbs 25:21).

2.2.2 Justice is Restoration

Violation against the life that God has given always requires recompense for the damage done to the victim. Various examples of this are given in the context of the covenant; e.g. injury through violence (Exod. 21:18-23), theft (22:1-4), or neglect (22:5-15). The principle of an “eye for an eye” (Exod. 21:24-25) is not revenge, but as the context makes clear, it is payment for damages done.

Cases of injury and loss of life are another matter. If compensation is possible, as the injury of a worker or injury through an animal, then compensation must be given (Exod. 21:26-32). Where there is willful murder, the life belongs to God; those who willfully take the life that God has given are “given back to God” (e.g. Exod. 21:12-17).

It is the responsibility of law enforcers to make sure that properly identified willful murderers cannot repeat. This is the lesson of the flood (Genesis 9:6); this is the means of controlling *hamas* that comes to fill the whole earth (Genesis 6:11).

The role of government and law enforcement in the society of the covenant is to restore to the victim damages done, and to control violence. There is the possibility of mercy where restoration is impossible. David was a murderer, but was not executed for his sins. He did suffer enormous consequences for his actions (2 Sam. 12:11-12); he spoke of the lessons learned (Psalm 51) and of the relief of forgiveness (Psalm 32).

3. The Demand for Justice

The prophets demanded justice, and not sacrifice (Micah 6:1-8; Isaiah 1:10-20). Naboth's vineyard (1 Kings 21) was the rallying cry for the end of a dynasty (2 Kings 9:21-37).