Rightly Responding to Injustice

Texts: Various

Rev. David Waldron

Scriptures: 1 Corinthians 6:1-11; 1 Peter 2:18-20; Matthew 5:38-48; Romans 12:14-21; Isaiah 1:16-17; James 1:27; Romans 3:21-26

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 9, 288, 82, 279, 367

Series: Topical

Theme: The Scriptures teach the right response for God’s people to the suffering which they themselves and others will inevitably experience due to injustice in this fallen world

Proposition: Brothers and sisters, we are called to respond to injustice in a Christ-like manner

**Introduction**

I was at the dentist (again!) this past week having a tooth rebuilt. During a brief break when I didn’t have a drill, a suction hose or my dentist’s fingers in my mouth, he asked me what I planned to do for the rest of the day. I replied that I was writing a sermon on how to respond to injustice. To which he replied ‘there’s certainly plenty of that in the world’.

He is right. It’s been that way since our first parents rebelled against God in the garden of Eden. After that, Cain murdered his brother Abel; Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers; a Levite’s concubine was gang raped to death and then her body cut into 12 pieces and sent throughout the land of Israel; David took another man’s wife and then had her husband killed; Naboth was unjustly stoned to death so that evil Jezebel could grab his vineyard for her wicked husband Ahab; the faithful prophet Jeremiah was thrown into an empty water cistern to die; Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were cast into a fiery furnace; Daniel spent a night in a lion’s den; John the Baptist spoke the truth and lost his head as a result; Jesus Christ was despised and rejected, smitten, wounded, afflicted, oppressed, tortured and killed, yet he had done no wrong.

My dentist is right. There is plenty of injustice in this world. Murder, theft, racism, abuse, and oppression are all around us. How should we, as God’s people, respond to injustice against ourselves and against others?

The Scriptures have much to teach us on this topic. This morning we’re going to look for an answer to this question from a number of different texts, under four headings, firstly:

1. **Be willing to suffer injustice (1 Corinthians 6:1-11; 1 Peter 2:18-20)**

Despite what some people may think, churches are not tidy places where everyone’s life is in good order, with everyone living faithfully and consistently following the Lord. To use Biblical language, churches like this one are ‘spotty’, ‘wrinkled’ and ‘blemished’ (Eph 5:27). To put it another way, Brothers and Sisters in Christ, we are all in the process of working out our salvation in fear and trembling (Phil 2:12).

The 1st century church in Corinth was young and messy with many problems. The central difficulty there and then was that the believers in that church were not detaching themselves from the ways of the unbelieving world around them.

One of the problems which the Apostle Paul writes to them about is taking personal disputes and grievances to the secular law courts. It was common practice in 1st cent. Greco-Roman society to take trivial matters to the civil magistrate as a means of establishing superiority over others.

The law prevented some people from bringing legal proceedings against others e.g. a son against his father, a slave against his master. Judges would take into account the wealth, status and power of the opposing parties and would be swayed by these considerations. Judges also regularly received bribes so that they would rule in the favour of the donor who gave the biggest inducement to them.

The point the Apostle Paul makes in 1 Cor 6 is that believers should not go outside the church in order to settle inter-personal disputes within the body of believers. It is better to willingly bear some injustices than to bring disgrace upon the church of Christ by publicly exposing disputes within the covenant community.

Please note that this text does **not** mean that crimes committed by church members should not be reported to the civil authorities e.g. sexual abuse, fraud, murder. The Word of God is clear that we have a responsibility to be subject to the governing authorities (e.g. Rom 13:1; 1 Pet 2:13) this includes wisely involving these authorities when crimes have been committed.

However, there are many minor injustices against ourselves which we can experience in church life which we can choose to suffer without seeking justice from the authorities, either civil or ecclesiastical.

In 1 Peter 2:18-25, the Apostle Peter writes to servants encouraging them to be subject to their masters with all respect, even if they are treated unjustly – ‘*for this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures suffering unjustly*’ (1 Pet 2:19). The majority of household servants in the 1st century Roman Empire were slaves who were owned by the masters. As we’ve already seen, the law prevented them taking grievances to court.

Likewise for us today, there are many injustices which we may experience in our workplaces which are difficult or impossible to bring before any court of law. It is wise to be prepared to suffer unfairness in this fallen world. Here are some questions which we can ask ourselves when we experience personal injustice:

* **Have I actually been unjustly treated, or is it more the case of me not being treated as I would like?** It is wise to recognize that our pride often results in us thinking we deserve more respect, honour and good treatment than we actually do. Rom 12:3 “*I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment*”.
* **Is the injustice or offence of a minor and nature such that I can absorb the hurt and let love ‘cover the sin’** (Prov 10:12; 1 Pet 4:8) without needing to speak to the person who has offended me? To take this path you must be confident that you can really let this minor offence go, not dwell on it, and not become bitter as a result of suffering the pain of not seeing it brought to light.
* **Is this a personal grievance which I have with a brother or sister in the church?** If so, the Scriptures call us to go in person to that fellow believer and ‘*tell him his fault, between you and him alone*’ (Matt 18:15). If he does not listen, then ‘*take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses*’ (Matt 18:16). If he does not listen, then tell it to the church’. If he still does not listen, let him be to you as an unbeliever.
* **Is this a personal offence which I do not think I have the strength to speak to the offender about?** In this situation it is wise to speak in confidence to a pastor, elder or mature believer for advice.
* **Is this a personal offence which is of a criminal nature?** This category of injustice likely needs to be taken to the civil authorities. Seeking advice from a pastor, elder or mature believer is often wise.
* **Is this a personal offence in which I have been unjustly treated by a non-Christian (e.g. in the workplace)?** If this is minor and not repeated it may be wise to suffer the injustice. If this is either major, or a repeated pattern, taking the matter to your immediate boss, or to the civil authorities can be wise.

If we do decide to take a personal grievance either to the offending person, or the civil authorities we must accept the reality that we may not see justice in this life. However, God has promised that all wrongs will be judged on the final Day of Judgement, but until then justice is often incomplete and imperfect. Until Christ returns we must wait, living in a world with many injustices.

The knowledge that human authorities may either not execute true justice or else that they may not rule as we would wish must not lead us to ‘take the law into our own hands’ – which brings us to our 2nd point:

1. **Do not seek revenge (Matthew 5:38-48; Romans 12:14-21)**

In the aftermath of the terrorist attack on mosques here in Christchurch there is widespread concern about retaliation against white westerners, against New Zealand as a country and/or against Christianity – which some people in the world wrongly equate with white racism. This concern has been fuelled with recent comments made by the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Revenge is ‘*the act of doing hurt or harm to another in return for wrong or injury suffered*’. When a person seeks to respond to an injustice with revenge, they take on the role of sole judge, bringing the punishment they deem fit for a crime committed against them or another person. In May 2009, George Tiller, one of only a few doctors in the nation who performed abortions late in pregnancy, was fatally shot on a Sunday in the foyer of his church as he handed out the church bulletin. Responding to evil with evil does not solve the problem of injustice but adds to it.

The Hebrew and Greek words in Scripture which are translated “vengeance,” “revenge,” and “avenge” all have as their root meaning the idea of punishment.Often revenge involves the penalty unjustly exceeding the crime. Retribution is frequently a greater evil than the original offence. In Gen 34 we read of the vengeance of Jacob’s sons Simeon and Levi when they deceived Shechem and Hamor and slaughtered them and their fellow men and looted their city because Shechem had raped their sister Dinah.

Contrast this wickedness to David when he had opportunity to repay Saul for seeking to kill him. David cut a corner off Saul’s robe in the cave where he was hiding, and Saul was relieving himself. He said to Saul “*I have not sinned against you, though you hunt my life to take it*” (1 Sam 24:11).

In His Word, God says ‘*vengeance is mine*” ([Deuteronomy 32:35](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Deut%2032.35); [Romans 12:19](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Rom%2012.19); [Hebrews 10:30](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Heb%2010.30)). God alone acts with absolutely purity. He knows all the facts and all the motives in the hearts of all people and perfectly judges all matters.

When we or others are treated unjustly, we can pray for God to avenge, knowing that with Him the punishment always fits the crime. “*O LORD, God of vengeance, O God of vengeance, shine forth! Rise up, O judge of the earth; repay to the proud what they deserve!*” (Ps 94:1-2) As Abraham said to God when he was interceding for the wicked city of Sodom: “*Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?*" (Gen 18:25b)

On one occasion God was pleased to use His people as instruments of His judgement against another nation. When the Midianites acted violently against the Israelites, God said to Moses “*Avenge the people of Israel on the Midianites*” (Num 31:2).

Ordinarily, regularly, God uses human institutions, civil authorities as instruments to ‘*punish those who do evil*’ (1 Peter 2:14). The God-instituted governing authorities are servants of God, avengers who carry out God’s wrath on wrongdoers (Rom 13:1-4). This does not mean that human governments always act justly or wisely.

However, vengeance is God’s prerogative, not ours. God’s Word teaches us: “*You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the LORD*” (Lev 19:18); “*Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good*” (Rom 12:21).

There was a standard of justice in OT times, whereby the punishment for a crime was to be limited, as expressed in Ex 21:24; Lev 24:20 and Deut 19.21: “*life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot*”. However there were those who saw this as a mandate for personal vengeance, to which Jesus said: **“***Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you*” (Mat 5:39-42). “*But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you*” (Matt 5:44).

‘Turning the other cheek’ is very hard when we are being treated unjustly and there are some situations where a response is wise for self-defence. However, when we choose not to retaliate and seek revenge, we show our trust in God and our confidence that He will respond to all injustice perfectly and completely.

Overcoming the evil of injustice includes the good of defending the vulnerable; which brings us to our 3rd point:

1. **Defend the vulnerable (Isaiah 1:16-17; James 1:27)**

We saw last week that to be vulnerable is to be ‘*susceptible to receiving wounds’*, ‘*exposed to the possibility of being attacked or harmed, either physically or emotionally’.*

Sometimes Christians deal with injustice in unjust or unwise ways which may include:

1. Joining in. Christian employers may reason “others underpay their staff, provide a substandard workplace environment and are prejudiced against races other than their own.

It’s just the way things are ‘if you can’t beat them, join them”.

1. Pretending that vulnerable people do not suffer injustice.

It’s the idea that ‘the world is really not that bad and even if it is then I’ll just ignore it’. I won’t think about people suffering: child sex trade, abortions, racial oppression and discrimination, domestic violence, suicide. The Christian church is thought by many today to be ‘out of touch with the real world’ – in many cases this is sadly true. Jesus did not turn a blind eye to evil. He lived in the ‘cesspool’ of this broken world. He wept, he grieved, and he suffered.

1. Trying to insulate ourselves from injustice in the world e.g. setting up a closed community e.g. Gloriavale on the West Coast of New Zealand. Some Christian churches over-emphasis covenant community and ministries to their own families whilst largely ignoring the suffering world outside the church.
2. What do the Scripture say?

**God cares for the vulnerable, therefore so should we.**

God said to His people Israel through the prophet Isaiah “*Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause*” (Isaiah 1:16-17). Justice includes meeting the needs of the vulnerable as James wisely summarises “*Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction*” (James 1:27).

Jesus showed deep compassion for the poor, the sick, the outcast, the dispossessed, the oppressed, the grieving. He ministered much to the lower ‘rungs’ of society. To those who were most vulnerable. However He did **not** come to this earth to be a political or social reformer. His ‘end goal’ was not the transformation of culture on this world. The focus of His ministry was **not** human governments or institutions.

His attention was first and foremost directed to the hearts of people like you and me. He was most concerned about the state of people’s souls. When the hearts of people like you and me are transformed by hearing and believing the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ, then we begin to affect the society around us – just like salt affects all the food it is mixed in with. When many hearts in a city or nation are changed by gospel then societal transformation occurs as a ‘by-product’ of salvation in Christ. Evil abates and good expands.

So in summary there are some things we must avoid as we consider the call to defend the vulnerable:

a) joining in with oppressing the vulnerable in society

b) ignoring the vulnerable in society

c) avoiding the vulnerable in society

d) thinking that our main task is to bring about changes to our society so that there will be no more vulnerable people

How can we as a church, as believing families, as individual Christians defend the vulnerable in our midst and around us in the world outside this covenant community?

However, first and foremost, our response to injustice must be to:

**4. Present the gospel (Romans 3:21-26)**

People have responded to the injustice of the recent shootings here in Christchurch in a variety of ways. Some have said ‘*there is a special place in Hell for people like that mass murderer- I hope he rots there forever*’. The terrorist’s crime is heinous, abominable and sickening. His actions were immoral. When reports of the mosque attacks came to air on the media, we would all agree that this was very very bad news. The ‘darkest day for our nation’.

In contrast, the gospel is good news—the good news of what God has done in responding rightly to human injustice. Though it is very good, the gospel also contains some very bad news. To hear and understand the good news, you must first hear and understand the bad news. Here it is.

The crimes of the mass murdering terrorist are heinous, abominable, and sickening. Would you agree? So are yours and mine. So are the crimes of all the descendants of Adam our common ancestor. That’s the bad news which we naturally find offensive. The Bible describes our heinous crimes this way: "*None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one*." (Rom 3:8-10)

If you say to most people ‘you deserve to go to Hell’ they will not like it. But it is true for them, it is true for you and it is true for me. The reason people like you and me struggle with this truth so much is that we do not really understand justice and injustice. We do not really understand that God’s standard of justice is perfect and that we have not met it. We do not understand that the penalty for this crime is physical and spiritual death. Physical death is well understood. The body ceases to live. Spiritual death is less well understood. Spiritual death is the state where someone does not have a living relationship with God. They are separated from Him. This is the essence of Hell – to be forsaken by God.

The reason we find the idea of all people deserving to be in Hell is that we do not comprehend the great holiness of God or the depth of our sin well enough. Our breaking of God’s law is a crime we tend to think of more lightly than we ought. All sin is deserving of death as James wisely reminds us - **“***For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it*” (James 2:10).

The bad news of the gospel is all about injustice. Injustice against God by us as members of the human race conceived in a state of rebellion against our good Creator. Romans 3:23 puts it this way: “*for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*”. Whilst our crimes against God are certainly not the same as the crimes of the terrorist, they are punishable by eternity in Hell, away from the goodness, love and peace of God.

The good news of the gospel is all about justice. God brought justice for His people by unleashing the penalty for their crimes upon His own Son, Jesus Christ. That itself would be a monstrous injustice, had Jesus not been willing to die for people like us. Jesus said “*For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord*”. (John 10:17-18) Jesus was willing to make himself the focus of injustice, even to the point of death on the cross. Jesus was willing to humble himself like a child, to become utterly dependent (think about his conception, birth and childhood), to submit Himself completely to His Father’s will.

On the cross at Calvary, Christ was despised and rejected by men, stricken by God and afflicted. Wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities, oppressed, cut out of the land of the living, put to grief as he bore the sin of many (from Isaiah 53). **He suffered more injustice than anyone else who has ever lived.** He was willing to suffer great injustice because that was a necessary part of God’s good will for Him (and for us, brothers and sisters).

Here then, in light of the completed work of Christ, are some questions for each one of us brothers and sisters in the Lord.

**Are you willing to suffer injustice as part of call to follow Him?** “*For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake*” (Phil 1:29).

**Are you committed to never ever seeking revenge?** Jesus was. He ‘turned the other cheek’ on the cross. He was led like a lamb to the slaughter, saying “*Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do*” (Luke 23:34).

**Will you defend the vulnerable?** Jesus did. Brother, sister, you are one of the vulnerable people Christ defended. He ‘took the hit’ for you on the cross. Figuratively speaking he stopped the bullet that was heading for you.

**Will you present the gospel?** This good news is God’s righteous response to human injustice.

Here’s one text you could study, write down or memorise and use to explain God’s response to human injustice: “*for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation (*satisfying the righteous anger of God against human injustice*) by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus*” (Rom 3:23-26)

My dentist is right – there is plenty of injustice in this world. We know exactly why this is – for God has told us in his word. We know exactly what God has done to respond to human injustice. We live in a world which desperately needs to hear these things.

Are you willing to tell others so that they too may be saved from the wrath to come on that final Day of Judgement when Christ will perfectly judge all people and there will be no more injustice?

AMEN