

Living in God's Presence

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[0:00] Good morning. Please turn your Bibles back to Leviticus 24. As we are continuing our series through the book of Leviticus.

I've got a little sister, a younger sister, and my sister came here to Australia to study a few years ago. Just like all international students, she had to pay a tuition fee that was three, four times higher than the domestic student fee, which is fair because citizens have certain privileges from government-funded universities.

But then a couple of years later, after she graduated, she went back to Indonesia, she took an internship in Jakarta, and at the same time, at that same company, there was a foreigner from a Western country who got an internship.

Now, in Indonesia, foreign workers are highly, highly valued. So that foreigner, who had the same qualification as my sister, was paid five times her salary for the same role, doing the same things.

And this happens not only to my sister, it happens not only to women either, it happens to a lot of Indonesian people in Indonesia. That's a bit unfair, isn't it?

[1:44] Indonesian people who go to Western countries to study have to pay three to four times higher tuition fee, but when they go back to their own country, they get paid five times less than the Westerners who probably study here and don't get to pay a lot.

Well, that's how the world is, isn't it? Sometimes human treatment of other humans can be unjust and unfair.

But we will see in this passage that that's not the case with God. Here in our passage, we see God's holy justice. Now, holy, if you remember, holy means good and different, different, and so we see God's justice that is different to the justice of the world.

And we will see that His good and different justice manifested most clearly in Jesus on the cross. But before we study the passage that we just read in Leviticus 24, we should go back a bit to the beginning of chapter 24.

So in verse 1 to 4, there on the screen, God tells Moses that the fire, the light of the fire in the tabernacle lamp must be kept continually.

[3:08] And then in verse 8, God tells Moses that the 12 loaves of bread must be set out before the Lord regularly on behalf of the Israelites.

So here, just quickly, before we get to our passage, the fire in the lamp represents God's light-giving presence to the people, which is continual.

And that's why it has to be kept on continually. And the 12 loaves of bread represent the 12 tribes of Israel. It says there, on behalf of the Israelites.

So they represent the 12 tribes of Israel that are kept close to God as his treasured possession, as he has promised.

So God is present with his people continually, just as his people are kept close to him continually. And then straight away, the passage turns to the incident in our reading.

[4:16] So the story turns from the legislation of the tabernacle to the story that we just heard. And I think there's a theological intention in that structure.

That is, this story is a direct practical application of God's continual holy presence among the people. Because God is continually present among the people, and because God is holy, then the people ought to practice God's holy justice.

So, this is what happened in verse 10 to 12. Now, the son of an Israelite mother and an Egyptian father went out among the Israelites, and a fight broke out in the camp between him and an Israelite.

The son of the Israelite woman blasphemed the name, that is, God's name, Yahweh, with a curse. So they brought him to Moses. His mother's name was Shelomith, the daughter of Dibri, the Danite.

They put him in custody until the will of the Lord should be made clear to them. So here, a fight broke out between two people, which is not necessarily uncommon.

[5:35] But this fight was special. First, the text tells us why it's special by highlighting the ethnicities of the people involved. In verse 10, one of the people was an Israelite, but the other was half Israelite and half Egyptian.

In other words, this is a fight between a foreigner or a half foreigner and a citizen. And what's worse in verse 10 and in verse 11, during the kerfuffle, the foreigner cursed God's name and so committed blasphemy.

So in verse 12, Moses asks God what they should do. God's answer shows his justice in verse 13 to 16. Then the Lord said to Moses, Take the blasphemer outside the camp.

All those who heard him are to lay their hands on his head and the entire assembly is to stone him. Say to the Israelites, Anyone who curses their God will be held responsible.

Anyone who blasphemes the name of the Lord is to be put to death. The entire assembly must stone them, whether foreigner or native born, when they blaspheme the name, they are to be put to death.

[6:58] So here, first of all, we see that God doesn't care about the perpetrator's ethnicity. The text highlights his ethnicity, but in verse 14, God answers and he disregards the ethnicity completely.

He says, the blasphemer, he is not an Israelite, he is not an Egyptian, he is merely the blasphemer. The one thing that God's concerned with was what he did.

He dishonored the name of God. And in verse 16, God highlights that regardless of their ethnic identity, whoever blasphemes his name must be equally judged with equal punishment.

So, this makes his justice holy, that is, different to how humans handle justice. We tend to discriminate, don't we?

In the ancient Roman Empire, for example, Roman citizens were very rarely crucified. Crucifixion was, generally speaking, only for slaves and foreigners.

[8:09] And even today as well. For example, I went to Japan the other day and there's a lot of apartment buildings and hotels with signs that say foreigners are not allowed to enter.

In Malaysia, Malay Malaysians have certain privileges that Chinese Malaysians or Indian Malaysians don't have. Or in Indonesia, for a long time until recently, only indigenous Indonesian people could run for presidency.

So me, I can't because even though my family has been in Indonesia for three, four generations, I'm not an indigenous Indonesian, I'm Chinese Indonesian.

Not that I want to run for presidency, but anyway. Human policies can be discriminatory. God's justice, however, is holy.

It's different. It's fair. Anyone who blasphemed his name as long as they resided in Israel, God treated in the same way.

[9:16] But we who live in this modern era might say that, okay, even though God treated everyone equally, the punishment, the punishment for blasphemy itself was not fair.

It's death. Come on. Death as a punishment for a flippant remark during a fight? Well, we need to read this from the perspective of the culture at the time.

Honor was a big thing. For the Israelites, God's name was most holy, most sacred, most honorable. After all, he is the king of kings.

Hearing God's name being dishonored shook them to their core, to the point that even those who heard the profanity in verse 14 had to shake it off them by putting their hands on the blasphemer before he stoned to death.

It is as if they needed to be atoned for as well, even though they didn't do anything except for hearing the profanity. And this law also helped the Israelites to love their God, because you wouldn't want someone that you love, your child or your spouse, to be dishonored and mocked and be called names, would you?

[10:47] God's name is so honorable because he's the most lovable for the Israelites. So whoever dishonors it is to be punished with the highest punishment, the highest degree of punishment, and that is death.

Now this concept might be foreign to our modern ears, but it's not unheard of. In Japan, for example, people often commit suicide or exile themselves when they lose their honor.

Even in America, just 300 years ago, when kings were still sovereign, this concept was still understandable. We hear from Jonathan Edwards, a pastor who lived 300 years ago, and he said, if it should prove a fearful thing to disobey and rebel against an earthly king's authority, and to trample on his majesty, and if a greater king brings greater honor and dignity to the crown, then why shouldn't the honor and dignity of the divine majesty, which is infinitely greater than of an earthly prince, require an infinitely greater punishment?

They got it 300 years ago in America. Dishonoring a king gets punished more heavily than dishonoring an ordinary person, and so it's fair and just that dishonoring God's name, whose honor is infinite, requires the greatest punishment, death.

So, here we see fairness in punishment, that is equal to the value of the offense. And this leads to other cases where values are considered fairly according to the value of the offense.

[12:46] So, in verse 17 to 22, we read, anyone who takes the life of a human being is to be put to death, but anyone who takes the life of someone's animal must make restitution, life for life.

Anyone who injures their neighbor is to be injured in the same manner, fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, the one who has inflicted the injury must suffer the same injury.

Whoever kills an animal must make restitution, but whoever kills a human being is to be put to death. You are to have the same law, again, for the foreigner and the native born.

I am the Lord your God. Here again we see God's fairness in applying punishment according to the value of the offense.

So, blasphemy against God whose honor is infinite is to be treated infinitely more, infinitely worse, with death. But also in verse 17, someone who murders another human being is also to be put to death because God sees humans, both native and foreigners, as bearers of his image.

[14:03] Dishonoring God and murdering his image result in the same punishment, death. But, in verse 18, if someone kills another person's animal, the punishment is lesser.

Restitution, they had to pay the value of the life of the animal that dies. Again, this is wholly different to the various laws during that time.

So, for example, various Mesopotamian laws, the neighboring countries of Israel, they regarded property offenses, destroying someone else's property, as capital crimes, the punishment of which was death, the same as murder.

But in the Old Testament, for God, human lives are worth infinitely more than the most expensive animals or properties, because they bear his image.

Can you see the difference between these laws in the Old Testament and the laws during that time? law? And so, in verse 19 to 20, anyone who injures someone else must make a payment according to the value of the injury, fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth.

[15 : 28] Again, we see fairness. And here, we need to realize that this law was not given for revenge, but to limit anarchy.

So, for example, if during a fight someone causes someone else to lose an eye, the other person can't just retaliate and then kill them. That's more than the offense, than the value of the offense.

offense. They have to go through the communal justice system, and the community, through the judges, can demand the perpetrator to pay with the value of an eye.

And despite how it sounds to our modern ears, this law was actually given to promote love and life. In other places in the Old Testament, we see that in most cases this law was applied not literally, and so retaliation was not the point.

For example, in Exodus 21, if a slave lost an eye, he was given his freedom. So there, we don't see eye for eye, we see eye for freedom.

[16 : 42] Because freedom, that is life, is more important than eye. It promoted love and life. And then in Leviticus 24, a man who killed an ox, for example, had to pay its owner enough money to enable him to buy a new ox.

So there, again, the life for life principle is not literal. And the law forced them to go through the communal system to work out together what the value of the ox was, in love, as it were, and then demands payment.

Again, this law promoted love and life. And then in Numbers 35, if someone kills another person unintentionally, then they must not be punished by death.

Instead, they must be protected together by the community, again, as it were, with love, so that the family of the victim don't kill them out of anarchy and vengeance.

So, the law was given here to promote love and life. No retaliation, just be fair. And so, in this passage, we see that God is just and his justice is holy, different to what human laws, especially back then, showed.

[18 : 21] His justice promotes love towards God, don't blaspheme, and towards others. Be fair, don't retaliate, just be fair. And it promotes life.

But God's justice here is expressed in a particular time and place. Although it's still good, we live on the other side of the cross, don't we?

And we can see better from this perspective. Because in the New Testament, we see how God himself, in Jesus, practiced his justice for the sake of love and life.

And it's wholly different. Jesus quoted this law in our passage, in Matthew 5, in our second reading. You have heard that it was said, eye for eye and tooth for tooth.

But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. This is holy justice. It's different, radical even.

[19:32] Because this justice is expressed in love. Now it's important to note here that Jesus is not negating what was said in the Old Testament.

He's simply putting the law back to its original intention, promoting love and life. Because it seems that from the context, the people probably took this law and used it for revenge.

Eye for eye, tooth for tooth. Okay, it would have been so easy to ask, to what extent can I have my personal revenge without breaking this law? love. But Jesus turned it back to the heart of the law.

That is, love that promotes human life as God's image. And so, turned the other cheek. And he didn't just preach it, did he?

He practiced it on the cross when he gave up his right to retaliate and willingly submitted himself to the unfair punishment.

[20:39] On the cross, Jesus took the punishment that he did not deserve upon himself. He was innocent. He's the only truly innocent person in history.

If there's anyone who has any right to retaliate, to ask for payment, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, life for life, it would be Jesus. But he did not.

Because he knew that even though his punishment was unfair to him, he was actually taking God's just judgment that we're supposed to pay.

On the cross, God's love and his justice meet. He expressed his love to us by giving up his right to retaliate and paying for the just judgment with his own life.

It's just, but it's also love. Because how many times do we blaspheme God? Not by our words, but by our lives.

[21:48] Our lives dishonor God from time to time, don't they? We live as if God is not the king of kings, and that dishonors him, doesn't it?

Or how many times do we murder others by despising them? Like Jesus says in Matthew 5, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, you shall not murder and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.

But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. That's us. I have certainly done that.

theologian Don Carson comments on this passage. He says, Jesus here confronts his audience. You who think yourselves far removed, morally speaking, from murderers, have you not hated?

Have you never wished someone were dead? Have you not frequently stooped to the use of contempt, even to character assassination? We all deserve to be stoned to death like a blasphemer, like a murderer.

[23:04] But Jesus took our sins upon himself and he paid the punishment. It's just, but it's also love.

Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, life for life, his life for ours. So by seeing God's justice, not only in the Old Testament, but also in how Jesus preached and practiced it, we see justice in a three-dimensional perspective.

We can see more clearly what his justice demands. It demands perfection, perfect justice, and then we compare it to our lives, and then we finally realize, hang on a minute, I violate his justice often.

So we start to realize that even though sometimes we are victims of injustices in this world, we are also often perpetrators of hatred and unjust treatment of others, and our lives dishonor God, and we too deserve punishment.

And then, only after we realize that we deserve punishment, but we have been saved from God's just judgment, only then can we try to apply God's justice and love in this world.

[24:37] So we cannot get to the application without first taking that journey from victims who demand justice from God, to realizing that we too are perpetrators against God, to being saved by God, to being used by God as his witnesses in his kingdom.

In Jesus, we are enabled to do the same, to give up our right to retaliate for the sake of love. Just last Thursday, there was a talk by Reverend Yohana Katanachu at Ridley College.

Yohana is a professor of biblical studies at Nazareth Evangelical College in Israel. So he lives in Israel, he's an Israeli citizen, Christian, but he's ethnically Arab Palestinian.

Can you imagine that in today's situation in Israel? And he's a Christian. So he witnesses firsthand how the country in Israel is divided, and there's a lot of fragmentation and anger between the Arab Palestinians who live in Israel and the Jews.

So when he was a young Christian, he found it really hard to obey the biblical command, love your enemies, or love your neighbors even, because literally his neighbors are his enemies.

[26:12] love your enemies. But after a personal encounter with Jesus, slowly he decided to show love instead of demanding justice, or at least what he thought was justice, his right to retaliate.

He talked about the passage in Matthew 5, this passage, where Jesus says, turn the other cheek, and then he said, between the first and the second slaps, something happens in the victim's heart that makes them question, am I going to be a victim that demands retribution, or am I going to be a missionary, a witness to God's kingdom, and show love to this person?

In fact, Johanna told a story about the time he was approached by a couple of Israeli soldiers, and they put machine guns on his head, just because he's a Palestinian, not, he didn't do anything wrong, he was just walking on the street, but he gave up his right to retaliate.

In response, Johanna put his hand on his heart, and he said, I love you, I love you. The soldiers were shocked, they lowered their guns, and they said, I wish all Palestinians were like you, but Johanna said, no, I wish you were like me, followers of Jesus.

There's an opportunity when we give up our right to retaliate, and it is our right to retaliate, but when we give it up for the sake of love, there's an opportunity to be missionaries, to be witnesses of God's love in Jesus.

[28:09] God's justice is holy, it's different, and it manifests itself in love, and we see that most clearly on the cross. So how do we, Christians, who have witnessed first-hand God's holy justice and holy love on the cross, how do we express that holy justice in love towards the people around us, especially our enemies?

like Johanna, so that their punishment can be paid by Jesus on the cross as well. That's not an easy thing to do.

And so let's pray and ask for God's help. Thank you, Father, that you are just and your justice is good to us.

But thank you that you have expressed your holy justice most clearly through your holy love on the cross of Jesus, because otherwise we would all be punished and we would all die.

So help us, Lord, through your spirit to be witnesses, to show forth your justice and love to the people around us, pointing them to the cross. In Jesus, the one who turned the other cheek, we pray.

[29:31] Amen. Amen.