

1 Samuel 15:1-9: The Problem of Justice

I want to take a little more time approaching this next section of 1 Samuel. On the one hand, it is significant in Israel's history that their first king is rejected by Yahweh who put him there in the first place. The rejection of Saul as king is a major turning point in the life of Israel. We'll look more at that next week.

On the other hand, I think we have to spend some time considering whether or not God is just in ordering the death of the Amalakites. The command from God here is simple: every last one of the Amalekites - men, women, children, infants. It doesn't matter who you are, that's a difficult pill to swallow. How just is God? How fair is God?

Modern language would call this genocide; and that is what it is. It is the elimination of a people based on their history and their ancestry. So the question is: Is that just? Is that fair? How can God do that?

When we talk to unbelievers about the Bible this is often an objection they bring up. "How could we worship a God who decrees the destruction of whole people groups including women and children?" Or maybe you've been reading through the OT and come across these passages and wondered how to deal with them. I was talking to a man who had been a Christian for many years but knew very little about the OT. When he came across passages like this for the first time it was quite a shock to his faith.

How do we deal with this section? What I want to do, is sort of put together a theology of morbidity. A theology of death and capital punishment and how it relates to our lives and then come back and address the passage we're in.

Let me start to answer that question this way: Most people want justice. They want evil behavior punished and they want good behavior rewarded. That's what justice is. Justice is the proper response to human behavior. It is doing what is right and punishing what is wrong. Paul touches on that in **Rom. 13:1-7** in his discussion on authorities. The authorities in our lives approve what is good and punish what is bad. Most all of us want that.

But we also realize that justice is broken. Sometimes justice doesn't happen. I like to listen to a podcast called The World and Everything in It - it's sort of Christian NPR news and every Monday they have a segment called the Legal Docket. It's a summary of what happened at the Supreme Court the prior week. And many times it's disheartening because at the highest levels of government, sometimes justice is missing.

Some of you will remember back in the 80s and 90s there were dozens of high profile murder cases where it was proven beyond a shadow of a doubt that the person who was charged with the crime was guilty. In many cases the person even confessed. But they were found not guilty by reason of insanity. They wouldn't be put to death, they would live out their days in a well furnished mental institution.

And without going into specific cases, there was this general outcry from most people that this was not fair. This was not just. Justice had been corrupted. Those who premeditate a murder against others should be put to death.

But here's the problem: not everyone has the same definition of justice. Some people think it's **unjust** to put a murderer to death. They believe that no matter how many people a person has killed, no matter what their mental clarity or intention a person should never be deprived of life. We actually have 2 justices on the Supreme Court right now who believe that the death penalty is, in all cases, unconstitutional and immoral. They, along with many others, believe that there is never a situation that would call for capital punishment.

Well, who's right? If ever there was a moral issue, this is it. Do we end a human life because of what they have done or don't we? Putting an individual to death is the ultimate consequence this side of eternity. Some say yes, some say no.

Who decides what true justice really is? I hope your first instinct is to say that God decides what is right. We look to his Word for direct commands, for principles, for patterns, for examples.

We do that because God wants justice. And he doesn't just want theoretical justice. He wants actual justice.

Micah 6:8: He has told you, O Man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly before your God?

I don't know if you caught that, but we are to **do** justice. It's not just a theory. We are to live just lives. As much as is possible by our power we are to see that justice is done. In order to do that we have to know what God wants.

So we're going to take a long theological look at justice before coming back to our text here. We could talk about justice on a lot of different levels about a lot of different topics. But we're going to keep our discussion to life and death issues just to stay focused.

So let me lay some foundations for justice and then we'll come back.

1) God does not owe life to anyone.

From the air we breathe, to the molecules that make up our physical bodies it all belongs to God. Even our soul is given to us by God and even the eternal destiny of our souls has been predestined by him before the foundation of the world.

Acts 17:25: He himself gives to mankind life and breath and everything.

Ezekiel. 18:4: All souls are mine.

God owns us physically. God owns us spiritually. Everything about our existence is comes from the living God who gives us life in every aspect possible. Every person is completely God's property.

Romans 9:21: Has the Potter - God - no right over the clay to make one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?

It's up to God how he uses every single person. We are all his. We are responsible for our actions. We are accountable for how we live. Yet he still makes us and uses us for his purposes and his designs. He is the Potter, who are we to call him to account?

2) We deserve death because we sin.

The verse we read in Ezekiel starts off with "All souls are mine." But the rest of the verse is:

Ezekiel. 18:4: Behold, all souls are mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is mine: the soul who sins shall die.

This is the reality of our sin. Not only do we not deserve life. Every single breath of oxygen we take is a gift of God. What all mankind actually deserves is death. We are sinners.

The wages of sin is what? Death (**Rom. 6:23**). The millisecond we sin for the very first time we are deserving of death. Whether you steal a pack of gum a million dollars. Whether you look at a woman with lust or actually commit adultery. Every complaint, every impulse of greed, every act of drunkenness, every wasted dollar, every white lie deserves death.

To think about the magnitude of that, if a person sinned 5 times a day that's 1800 times a year, 18,000 a decade. If you're 40 years old that's 72,000 counts of sin deserving of death. God has all the right in the world to execute us and he would be completely just, completely righteous to do so. And if we're honest sinning 5 times in a day is probably an amazingly good day.

Just imagine if someone stole against you, lusted against you, used your name as a swear word 1,800 times a year. You'd probably be pretty angry. But we're sinners too. God is infinitely holy. You know what we call the

fact that God doesn't immediately give us what we deserve? We call that mercy. God is an amazingly merciful God.

And he's merciful even though our situation is actually even worse than that.

3) We all deserve death because we are sinners by nature.

Turn over to **Rom 5** for a minute. The Bible teaches that not only are we sinners by choice but that we are sinners by nature. We sin because we are sinners. Just like we breathe oxygen because we are mammals - that's our nature - that's what we do. We sin because that is our nature. But what **Rom. 5** tells us is that even our sin nature makes us worthy of condemnation. **Read 17-19**

Did you get that? One trespass, one sin, led to our condemnation. Who sinned that caused all of that? Adam's. So because Adam sinned, we are all guilty and deserving of wrath. Get this: we don't even have to commit a sin in order to be guilty before God. We are guilty simply because we are the offspring of Adam.

I remember being in football practice when I was a kid and if the team captains messed up a play we all ran laps. Actually, if **anyone** messed up we all ran laps. How fair is that? It didn't matter because the coaches didn't really put up with arguing about it. God doesn't put up with it either.

Rom. 9:20 when the objection is raised against God's fairness Paul just says "Who are you, O man, to talk back to God?"

But that kind of feel is how dire the situation is. And Paul's point here is that everyone who is in Adam is guilty. We're all born in Adam. He is our federal head. And even if we weren't guilty because of Adam, we would still sin anyway.

Then he turns it around. **Read 18**

One act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. Does that mean all people everywhere are saved? Did Jesus save everyone? No. Actually he makes the distinction in 2 places. First in **Vs. 17** it's only those who **receive** the abundance of grace through faith in Jesus. To escape eternal condemnation, you must believe in Christ. You must turn from sin and trust in him alone as your Savior. Condemnation is for all men who are in Adam. Which all of us are by nature. Righteousness is for all men who are in Jesus, which only comes about by receiving his forgiveness through faith.

He also makes the point later when he says in **Vs. 19** that many were made sinners...and many will be made righteous. The way a person goes from guilty to righteous in through Christ.

Side: If someone thinks being guilty because of Adam is unjust, well then it's also not just that we are righteous because of Jesus.

But the larger point Paul is making is that we are not just guilty when we commit a sin. We're guilty because we are sinful by nature. We are dead on arrival by our very nature and deserve his wrath.

When God drowned the entire world in the Genesis flood, he didn't give anyone an account for his actions. He was completely just to do so. They were all sinners by nature and by choice. So we have to begin the discussion of God's justice from the standpoint of human sinfulness.

4) God has given humanity the duty to end life in certain situations. **Turn to Rom 13** for a moment. This passage is a classic passage on the institution of government and our submission to governing authorities. Christians are never to be a threat to their governing authorities. We are to obey them, respect them, honor them because they are given to us by God. There is a lot we could say there, but I want to focus specifically on the fact that God has given the state the ability to use the sword. **Read 1-5**

Again, a lot we could say here but I just want to focus on the fact that Paul assumes the ability of government - as God's agents, literally God's deacons - to end life. God has appointed authorities to deliver his judgement,

to terrorize evildoers, to bear the sword, and be an agent of God's wrath. You know what you do with a sword? You kill people with it. People will say that "bearing the sword" simply means to wield authority. Well, that's the symbol it comes to have. But why does it have that symbol? Because the sword kills. Paul doesn't reject the sword, he says we need to be careful because they wield the sword. It is wholly an instrument of death.

There are times when we as believers are called to disobey the government. If the government commands us to sin or if it prevents us from obedience. But nevertheless, the government has the God-given right to put people to death.

Look back at **Gen. 9**. This is the basis for what we call capital punishment. This is a command given to Noah by God just after the flood. And it is also given centuries before the Mosaic Law. This was a civic standard from the earliest chapters of the Bible. **Read 9:1-7**

So man can kill animals and that's just fine in God's economy. That's what the animals are there for. But it doesn't work the other way around. If an animal kills a man, the animal dies. And if a man kills another man, the man dies. There is a reckoning that is required for human death that is not required for animal death. Humans and animals are not equated because only man is made in the image of God. Man has dominion over the animals. And because God wants man to be fruitful and multiply, increase greatly on the earth and multiply in it, any animal or any person that opposes that mandate because of killing is destroyed.

Interestingly, the Bible says twice that the reason God drowned the whole world was because of violence on the earth. (**Gen. 6:11, 13**). So while the death penalty was primarily a means of justice in the world, it also seems to have had the affect of curbing such violence and ending those who advocate it. People claim that the death penalty has no curbing affect on crime; God says otherwise.

Now, I will say that God gave other reasons in the OC for capital punishment besides premeditated murder. Among those was adultery, bearing false witness in a trial, messing around with witchcraft, idolatry, so on. Those are more specific to Israel as a theocratic nation - a nation governed by God. I happen to believe that there are other crimes worthy of the death penalty. But at the very least, murder is clearly deserving capital punishment.

To answer our earlier question about who is right when it comes to capital punishment: we have to conclude that all those who oppose the death penalty oppose God's design for order and justice in the world. It's not being optimistic or peaceable or gentle when someone opposes the death penalty in cases of premeditated murder. It's actually rebellion against God who gave this command long before he gave the OT Law. It's hindering justice being done on the earth.

Now, what does any of this have to do with Saul destroying the Amalekites? Let me start putting pieces together.

- First piece: God can do whatever he wants to whoever he wants because all people are his. He owns us all.
- Second piece: God would be completely justified in putting people to death after just 1 sin. We sin continually against God.
- Third piece: God would be justified in putting us to death simply because we are sinners by nature. Just the fact that we are born in Adam means we are deserving of death and wrath.
- Fourth piece: God has commanded those who wantonly murder others to be put to death through capital punishment.

We'd be in checkmate with any **one** of those pieces. And yet we're all guilty of 3 of them. Get this: Amalek was guilty of all 4.

Turn over to **Exo. 17:8-16**. We looked last week at the origins of the Amalekites. Amalek was one of the grandsons of Esau. Esau was not blessed by God, he would have no spiritual inheritance. It was his twin brother Jacob and Jacob's offspring that was blessed.

But God in his mercy did increase Esau's descendants. One of Esau's grandsons was Amalek. Whatever happened to Amalek? Well, here in **Exo. 17** we have some of the history of the Amalekites. And it's not good. Amalek grew into a nation. As we saw last week, they inhabited the region south of the Promised Land in the Sinai peninsula.

Here in **Exodus 17**, Israel has just been freed from Egypt. God has brought them out and they are on their way to Mt. Sinai. But while they are traveling to Mt. Sinai they are attacked by none other than the Amalekites. Most of you will probably remember one of the key features of this battle.

Just to set the stage here: Israel is literally homeless. All 2 million of the Israelites have just come out of Egypt. They are slowly making their way through the desert when Amalek sees them. They are easy prey and Amalek pounces on them. **Read 8-16**

So the battle takes place at Rephidim. This is very far south in the Sinai peninsula, probably very close to Mt. Sinai itself. And it's the classic battle where Moses holds up his staff and as long as the staff is in the air Israel wins. When he lets the staff down, Israel loses. So Aaron and Hur prop his arms up so Israel wins.

And God makes a decree that Amalek will be wiped out. God will blot out the name of Amalek from under heaven. The And just to show Israel that it is God who saves them and protects them, they are victorious when Moses holds the staff up. When the staff is lowered Amalek gets the upper hand. It's a way to show the obviousness of God's giving success in the battle.

Now, in order to understand what Amalek did that was so heinous we have to go to **Deut. 25:17-19**. Certainly, attacking the people of God in the middle of the wilderness was bad, but here we see that they were exceptionally vicious. **Read 17-19**

So they attacked those at the back of the group. The weak and vulnerable. All those who were lagging behind. Those were usually women, little children, and the elderly. This wasn't honest warfare under anybody's definition. This was pillaging and plundering and destroying the weakest of the weak. It says "he cut off your tail" - he killed them. Mercilessly.

When we see mass shootings at schools here in America we recoil and are rightly outraged because these people are cowards. They go after the most vulnerable and weak in our society: children. We see this cowardly tactic in other parts of the world where Islamic militants and others will hide in hospitals or schools or behind women and children as they fight. They attack the most vulnerable and then go hide behind the vulnerable. This was the strategy of Amalek. Attack the weakest in Israel when the whole nation was at its most vulnerable.

And so God made it a law in the OC - 1 of the 613 laws - that once Israel had settled in the land, they were to turn and set their sites on the Amalekites and they were to have no mercy. They were to devote the entire nation to complete destruction. They were not to ever forget what the Amalekites had done to Israel. They were to execute God's wrath on Amalek.

Turn back to **1 Samuel 15**. It's with this theology and this background that we pick it all up with Saul. This long awaited vengeance that God had planned against Amalek is now about to come to pass. God had given Saul enough success within the Promised Land that he could now turn and fulfill the command that God had given against Amalek.

Now, remember that the Amalakites were south of Israel a fair ways. They lived in the desert, in difficult terrain, where resources were few. The city where Saul gathers the people is in the very far south of Judah, the southernmost tribe.

And the command is clear: everyone dies. I want to make 3 quick observations. **Read 3**

1) God wants the Israelites to completely destroy everyone. The sobering part is even children.

Why children? This is sobering and sad. As the father of 4 children this is hard to swallow. But the lives of children are just as much God's as the lives of adults. My children, ultimately, are not my children. I am called to manage them for God. They belong to God. And he will decide what happens to them.

All the Amalakite children were God's as well. He decides their fate, and decides their eternal destiny. We don't know what that is, but we can trust that God does.

The reality is that if the children are allowed to live not only will they grow up and avenge the death of their parents, more importantly they will lead Israel's heart astray. They will draw God's people after idols. And that's exactly what we see happen all through the OT.

Children don't stay children. They grow up and want vengeance. Here, it's Israel who is to be the avenger for God.

2) God wanted Israel to limit the effect of the damage. **Read 4-7**

Israel understood the gravity of the command. And they didn't take it lightly. The Kenites were a distinct group of people within the Amalakite community and Israel warned them of what was about to happen. God didn't promote indiscriminate carnage. He didn't promote bloodlust and violence for the sake of violence. God hates violence. This was justice and only those who God called to destroy were to be killed.

Side: Maybe it doesn't need to be said, but I'll say it anyway. There is no command for Christians - or anyone - to do anything like this anymore. Nations have the right by God to defend themselves with the sword. But there is no place in Scripture where wanton killing is permitted. And if you look at warfare, it has always been Christians who promote what is called "Just War Theory." Even the secular media outlet BBC recognizes that it is Christians who have sought through the ages to minimize casualties in war, while at the same time keeping people safe. Muslims don't, atheists don't. But we do because we serve a just God.

3) We are not the standard of justice, God is. **Read 8-9**

Saul disobeyed didn't he? What was the original command? Kill everyone and everything. He kept the best. He kept the good spoil, the fattened animals, and the king. You know what he did with justice? He took it into his own hands.

Just like Saul, we often take justice into our own hands. We think we know better than God does about who deserves what is right and what deserves punishment. From our own actions, to turning a blind eye to our friends or our children, to church discipline - we often skirt justice.

Remember **Micah 6:8**? What does he require of you, O Man, but to do justice. God calls us to live just lives because he is by nature the very essence of what justice is.

Pray