

Justice Through Injustice **Deuteronomy 5:20**

There's a story in the American Heritage online magazine that took place in San Francisco in the 1850's. It's a story about vigilante justice during the California goldrush. The goldrush brought all kinds of people from around the world, including ex-convicts from Australia and crooked lawyers and politicians from the eastern United States, and they had joined together in a growing crime ring in the city and were getting stronger every day. Some of the younger troublemakers had formed a gang who called themselves the Hounds and they were terrorizing immigrants in the poorer parts of town. Crime and rioting were getting out of hand and the local sheriff and authorities weren't doing anything about it. They had lost control of the situation. The city had grown too fast, there were few deputies and they were either incompetent, cowardly, or corrupt. There was no jail, and the judges were too slow or unwilling to tangle with the crooked defense lawyers.

Some of the concerned city leaders knew the citizens of San Francisco wouldn't sit idly by, so they called public meetings, gained widespread support, and organized their own justice system outside the law by which they could arrest, try, convict, and punish criminals – even at times in defiance of the officials who represented the law. They called themselves the Vigilantes. On one occasion on the night of June 10, 1851 it was recorded that, “a very large, rough, strong and vicious-looking man called Jenkins, an ex-Sydney convict” was caught stealing a small safe and apprehended by several Vigilantes. A meeting was called and before the police arrived Jenkins was tried, convicted and sentenced to hanging. At 2 am in the morning, Jenkins was marched through the streets to a small house from which projected a heavy wooded beam and he was hanged to death in front of a huge crowd of approving citizens.

Local authorities weren't doing enough, so the people of San Francisco took matters into their own hands. They operated outside of the legal system to enforce their own justice. By taking these actions they were ironically enforcing justice through injustice. Justice through injustice. In a lot of cases, we would probably find ourselves in the crowd giving our approval. Something inside of us demands justice. And when the legal authorities aren't doing anything, sometimes the best thing to do feels like enforcing a justice of your own.

Now I want us to think about this on a more personal level. When someone commits an offense against you and it's a situation that neither law enforcement nor any other authority will get involved, what should you do? There are all kinds of situations where this can happen. It might happen at work when a coworker or employer berates and belittles you and nothing can be done. It might happen at school when a classmate harasses or bullies you. It might be a teacher or coach who treats you unfairly or shows favoritism to people other than you. It might happen in your neighborhood when a neighbor verbally assaults you because your dog occasionally poops on their lawn. Or when they trespass on your property during hunting season but no one else sees. It might be a doctor who carelessly misdiagnoses you and you suffer with pain or illness that could have been avoided. It might be a friend who betrays you or an ex-spouse who takes advantage of you and lies about you in a divorce. Oftentimes in situations like these, the offender gets away without any consequences for their actions and we are left with various degrees of pain, anxiety, and trauma. And out of those experiences come strong desires to seek our own personal vigilante justice.

This morning I want to examine one of the most common ways we seek vigilante justice in these situations and determine if it is an acceptable course of action for a follower of Christ, or if there is a better alternative. We are looking at the second to last command in the Ten Commandments which will help us to consider these things.

Read Deuteronomy 5:20.

²⁰ ““And you shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

The more you look into this command, the more you find that it fits in as part of a whole new justice system that was designed by God for the people of Israel. When they were slaves in Egypt, the Israelites didn't have an official justice system – they were just slaves who were expected to do what they were told to do whether there was justice or not. But when God brought them out of slavery in Egypt and established them as a nation, he instructed them how to form a new government and justice system by which they would maintain peace and order in their communities. You can see these instructions throughout the laws he gave them on Mt. Sinai.

Some of the basic instructions are in Deuteronomy 16:18-20.

You shall appoint judges and officers in all your towns that the Lord your God is giving you, according to your tribes, and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment.¹⁹ You shall not pervert justice. You shall not show partiality, and you shall not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of the righteous.²⁰ Justice, and only justice, you shall follow, that you may live and inherit the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

So they were to appoint judges in every town who would hear disputes and make judgments according to the law. They were also to appoint various officers who would make sure the law and judgments were carried out. These judges and officers were to use righteous judgment and be vigilant to uphold justice. There was to be no place for bribery that could lead to unfair or partial treatment in this system. Justice was a foundational value for the new covenant community. It was to be upheld to the highest degree by the judges and officials, but it was also to be upheld by others involved in the cases, and these were the witnesses.

Some guidelines for witnesses are found in Deuteronomy 19:15.

A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed. Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established.

Witnesses were called upon to give essential testimony in cases in order to assist the judge in making a fair ruling. And the testimony of just one witness was never enough. There had to be at least two or three so that every case was determined based on the corroboration of multiple witnesses. Why was that necessary? Why wasn't the testimony of one witness enough? Because God knew the tendencies of the human heart and wanted to guard against corruption and a particular kind of personal vigilante justice. We see what some of these things in Exodus 23.

Read Exodus 23:1-3, 6-8

"You shall not spread a false report. You shall not join hands with a wicked man to be a malicious witness.² You shall not fall in with the many to do evil, nor shall you bear witness in a lawsuit, siding with the many, so as to pervert justice,³ nor shall you be partial to a poor man in his lawsuit.

⁶You shall not pervert the justice due to your poor in his lawsuit.⁷ Keep far from a false charge, and do not kill the innocent and righteous, for I will not acquit the

wicked. ⁸ And you shall take no bribe, for a bribe blinds the clear-sighted and subverts the cause of those who are in the right.

One witness was never enough because God knew there would be many occasions in which his people would be tempted to give a false report or false testimony about the person being accused. These verses point out that in some cases a person might be tempted to give a false testimony because of money – they might stand to make some money if the outcome of the ruling was in their favor. Or they might receive a bribe if they would tell some lies in order to sway a decision. In other cases, a witness might be tempted to say false things about a rich person in order to protect one who is poor, or about a poor person to gain favor with those who are rich. All these things can motivate someone to give a false report.

But there's another motivation we need to see. Verse 1 mentions a "malicious witness," and the Old Testament often speaks about the same thing – a witness motivated by anger and malice. Imagine a person standing on trial was someone who had previously done you harm in another situation. They never paid for their previous offense against you. There weren't any consequences for them. You don't really know anything about the current case against them, but the court asks if there are any witnesses... What would you do? This is your chance to make them pay. This is your chance to take matters into your own hands and say a few nasty things about them to give them what you think they deserve for what they did to you.

Occasions like this would come up in the Israelite communities where people testify against someone to satisfy their desire for personal vengeance. It was a way they could finally punish them for what they did. Their pain had turned to bitterness and they became a malicious witness. They were seeking personal justice through injustice.

All these different motivations can churn in the human heart when it comes to testifying about another person in court and I think this 9th commandment applies to all of them. Whether you're motivated by money, favoritism, or personal vengeance, God's command is the same: "you shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." God forbids all such practices.

Now how does this fit into our lives today? Because the situations we most often struggle with never make it to court and we probably will never even be in a situation where we can bear false witness against them. But even if we never testify against them in court, there is another way we can do basically the same thing. God brings this up in a passage in Leviticus 19. First he repeats the command as it applies in court, but then he speaks about how it can happen outside of court.

Read Leviticus 19:15-18.

¹⁵ “You shall do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor. ¹⁶ You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not stand up against the life of your neighbor: I am the Lord.

¹⁷ “You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him. ¹⁸ You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.

We may not lie about someone who has hurt or offended us in an actual court of law, but we will have many opportunities to slander them and try to ruin their reputation in our communities. We live in small communities where people know each other and there are going to be many people who know the neighbor, classmate, or coworker who has offended you. There are going to be times when their name comes up in conversation for various reasons. Their offense against you might have nothing to do with those current conversations, but you finally have the chance to inflict some punishment on them for what they did to you. You can add some juicy details of your own and embellish the truth.

Slander is when you purposefully say things about someone behind their back to try to ruin their reputation. And when someone has hurt or offended you and not had to pay for it, one of the easiest ways for us to punish them is through slander. Proverbs 25:18 says, “A man who bears false witness against his neighbor is like a war club, or a sword, or a sharp arrow.” Slander is a weapon of punishment. It feels good because we finally feel like there’s something we can do about the pain and hurt they’ve caused us. By ruining their reputation in the community we give them what we think they deserve.

But slander is wrong. Even though it may feel like justice is finally being done, it's not ok to slander someone. I think this is one of the biggest ways we "bear false witness against our neighbors" today. We are not allowed to seek justice through injustice. It's not ok to try to bring justice to a situation by sinning against them yourself. God commands us to not do it.

But is there another alternative? Because even though slander is wrong, justice is not. Justice is good. How are we supposed to do to satisfy our inner demand for justice if the person that hurts us doesn't face any consequences for their actions? The Bible gives us a pathway to a much better alternative.

Romans 12:19-21 says: *"Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord..."*

Haha! Yes! Hand them over to the wrath of God so he can carry out vengeance upon them! Is that what we're supposed to do? Imagine God pouring out wrath against them? Well, there's a little more to it than that. The passage goes on to say this: *"To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head."* ²¹ *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."* Similarly, Ephesians 4:31-32 says, *"Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. ³² Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you."*

The alternative to slander is forgiveness and kindness... But where is justice in that!?? Justice is mentioned in that last phrase of Eph. 4:32: "as God in Christ forgave you." God didn't make us suffer for all our sins against him... When we put our faith in Christ, God accepted Christ's suffering instead. Jesus died to pay the penalty for our sins and offenses against God and instead of having to pay the just punishment for our sins we receive God's forgiveness instead. And because of that, God now calls us to show that same forgiveness to others.

Forgiveness is when you willingly lay down your need to seek personal vengeance. You don't have to make them pay for what they did. You forgive them in the same way God forgave you and release them to God. By forgiving your offender and releasing them to God, you are then set free to do the unthinkable and actually

show kindness to them – kindness that God can use like burning coals on their head to convict them of the wrong they've done. You leave justice to God.

The command “you shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” is for our good. Bitterness, unforgiveness, and the relentless need to seek personal vigilante justice always eats a person up from the inside out. But forgiveness sets them free. Allow God to set you free this morning.

If someone comes to mind that has hurt or offended you and you have been harboring bitterness in your heart this morning, release them to God and forgive them. Trust that God will deal justly with that situation and choose to show kindness instead. By doing so you will be able to heal, and you will imitate your Father in heaven for others to see. In Matthew 5:43-45 Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,⁴⁵ so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven.”