

“Justice and God’s Sovereignty”
Ecclesiastes 3:16-17: 4:1-3
(Preached at Trinity, May 7, 2023)

I’m supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord’s Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

Disclaimer: These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I’ll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. Now Solomon will direct our attention to justice in this fallen world. He is still pressing the importance of understanding that without God as our focus nothing else has meaning. “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.”
Matthew Henry says it well: “Take away religion, and there is nothing valuable among men, nothing for the sake of which a wise man would think it worthwhile to live in this world.”¹
2. Solomon’s purpose in Ecclesiastes is to drive us to the ultimate meaning of life—live lived before God to the glory of God—to find our full and ultimate joy in God.
3. This next section begins with the end of **Verse 15** setting the tone. It is not easily translated. The NASB translates it:
Ecclesiastes 3:15 NAU - "for God seeks what has passed by."
The ESV takes us closer to the meaning: "God seeks what has been driven away."
 - A. It tells us that God is seeking that which has been driven away. God’s eye is upon the persecuted; those who have been treated unjustly. In other words, God seeks justice for the persecuted.
 - B. **Chapter 3** describes seasons. A time for everything. There will come a time for judgement upon those who perpetrated injustice in this world. In other words, the perpetrators of the persecution will be held accountable.
Again, translation can be vague:
Ecclesiastes 3:17 NAU - "I said to myself, "God will judge both the righteous man and the wicked man," for a time for every matter and for every deed is there."
Ecclesiastes 3:17 ESV - "I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every matter and for every work."
4. In this life we will often face the sharp dagger of injustice. But God will ultimately make all things right. All will get exactly what they deserve.

¹ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 1036.

- I. God expects consistent seasons of justice. It is always the right time for justice.
- A. Sadly, upon the earth justice is often lacking.
1. Solomon might write in Ecclesiastes, “A time for justice; a time for injustice.” All men hate injustice. Even children are quick to retort with the words, “That’s not fair!”
When we see a man pretending to be a woman competing in women’s sports most feel in their heart, “That’s not fair.”
Everyone hates a cheater.
 2. Oppression is too often the rule in this fallen world. The poor are oppressed, widows and orphans fall into the hands of the wicked. But in an unbiblical culture justice loses its meaning. Contemporary critical theory for example, divides society into oppressed groups and oppressor groups. A person can be labeled an oppressor simply by his racial, sexual orientation, or ethnicity.
 - A. Group identity is greater than personal responsibility. A white person is labeled a racist simply by virtue of being white. No white person is innocent. That is a perverted justice.
I am a sexist simply because I am white and male. That is perverted justice.
 - B. Our identity as human beings is found in relationship with God. We are all created in His image with great value and dignity. We are all equally fallen and equally in need of God’s mercy. We all need the redemption and restoration only available through Jesus Christ. This is universally true of all people regardless of race, class, and gender.
 - C. Critical theorists seldom speak of moral virtues like honesty, kindness, chastity, patience, and forgiveness. In fact, pressing for such moral virtues as sexual purity, marital fidelity, and modesty are labeled as the work of oppression.
 3. We can’t overlook the true injustices in this world. We can’t overlook the corruption of slavery and the terrible oppression that it brought. Robbing people of their humanity is sin. Genuine oppression is sin. Sin is present in both the oppressor and the oppressed.
This world is a world of murder, sexual exploitation, racial division, theft and dishonesty.
 4. In this world people are falsely accused. Characters are maligned.
 5. Even in our own nation where our Constitution was designed to maintain justice for all, too often our magistrates find ways to circumvent and disregard the Constitution.
- B. In **Verse 16** we read of the “place of justice.” What is the place of justice? Safe places. Places where justice is protected.
1. The civil magistrate should be a place of justice. God has charged them with maintaining justice.

- a. Paul described civil authorities as God's ministers to maintain justice.
Romans 13:4 NAU - "for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil."
 - b. The civil authorities should be a place of justice – but too often they are self-serving. Authority is abused.
 In the place where one expects righteousness there is wickedness.
 - c. This is Solomon's point here. There is often a complete dereliction of duty.
Ecclesiastes 3:16 NAU - "Furthermore, I have seen under the sun *that* in the place of justice there is wickedness and in the place of righteousness there is wickedness."
2. The courts should also be a place of justice – a place where wrongs are made right. Lady justice is blindfolded and the scales of justice are in perfect balance. But we know it doesn't always work that way.
 Too often the place of justice is a place of wickedness.
 The wicked are acquitted and the righteous are unjustly convicted.
 3. This was a continual problem in the Old Testament.
Isaiah 5:22-23 NAU - "Woe to those who are heroes in drinking wine And valiant men in mixing strong drink, ²³ Who justify the wicked for a bribe, And take away the rights of the ones who are in the right!"
 4. God has also provided Ecclesiastical authority endowed with the power of executing justice by way of excommunication.
Matthew 18:17 NAU - "If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."
- C. God has provided for places of justice in this world, but this is a fallen world. Because of sin justice can be fleeting
1. The wealthy can afford better representation and are much more likely to be acquitted than the poor.
 2. In our justice system people are often forced to make plea bargains confessing to crimes they did not commit.
 3. And civil suits can strip people of their savings even though they were not personally negligent.
 4. What we label as social justice today knows little about true justice.
 5. The entire abortion industry robs the rights of the helpless. This culture of death perpetrates terrible injustice.

- II. In the place where justice is neglected in the earth God will bring His perfect justice, in His own time.
- Ecclesiastes 3:17 NAU** - "God will judge both the righteous man and the wicked man," for a time for every matter and for every deed is there."
- A. God's justice is perfect justice
1. All human beings stand guilty before Him.
 2. All will stand before the judgment seat of Christ where perfect justice will be administered.
- 2 Corinthians 5:10 NAU** - "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad."
3. All will stand before a Judge who knows all. No witnesses will be called. He knows every thought you have ever had and every deed you have ever done. The secret things of men will be revealed.
- B. What about all of the injustices in this life?
1. What about the child abusers? What about drunk driver responsible for the death of a loved one? What do we do when our justice system fails us? There is something satisfying about the vigilante who steps in with personal justice.
 2. The Bible is not silent on the subject of revenge.

Romans 12:19 NAU - "Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord."

 - a. This means when we seek revenge we are taking that which is not ours to take. Vengeance belongs to God alone.
 - b. We may and should seek justice. We may not seek revenge. Personal vengeance is sinful. We put ourselves in the place of God.
 3. The guilty may deserve punishment but the place of judgment does not rest in our hands. We must trust in our sovereign God who will apply just judgment. It may not happen in this life, but it will happen.
- C. When God says, "vengeance is mine" He is saying that He alone has the right to exercise vengeance because ultimately, He alone has been offended
1. God will execute perfect justice. There will come a time of retribution, either in this life or after.

Ecclesiastes 3:17 NAU - "God will judge both the righteous man and the wicked man," for a time for every matter and for every deed is there."

Deuteronomy 32:35 NAU - "Vengeance is Mine, and retribution, In due time their foot will slip; For the day of their calamity is near, And the impending things are hastening upon them."
 2. We desire to retaliate when we are harmed. In our pride and self-love we want vindication. We want to stand before them as judge, jury, and

executioner.

Conclusion:

1. We have to remember that in this life God is sovereign in the administration of His justice. In this life God mingles His justice with mercy. It is often a case of justice delayed.
2. Justice delayed in no way means justice denied. Justice delayed does not mean God's perfect justice is being set aside. God's mercy is a wonderful grace in this life that guilty sinners too often squander.
3. Justice delayed means we need to be patient to wait upon God's sovereign judgment. The words of Abraham:

Genesis 18:25 NAU - "Far be it from You to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous and the wicked are *treated* alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?"

 - A. Sometimes we can identify with the martyrs of Revelation 6 and cry out, "How long? How much longer?"

Revelation 6:10 NAU - "How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?"
 - B. Will justice prevail? Will the 9/11 perpetrators receive judgment? Can those who lost loved ones know that justice will prevail? The answer is a resounding, yes.

Ecclesiastes 3:17 NAU - "God will judge both the righteous man and the wicked man," for a time for every matter and for every deed is there."
4. Yes, God has a plan. He works according to His time. We cannot know His timing so we are called to trust Him.

Ecclesiastes 3:1 NAU - "There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven--"

Charles Bridges:
 "Before us "we look" for the joyous hope, "according to his promise, of the new heavens, and the new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness." (2 Pet. 3:13.) Wait then the light of eternity. Hold fast the Christian confidence with unshaking grasp. "At evening time it shall be light."²

² Charles Bridges, *An Exposition of the Book of Ecclesiastes* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1860), 105.