



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Article:

📖 Divine Justice as Restorative Justice  
(*Prison*, pp. 11-19)

### What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to [Christian\\_Reflection@baylor.edu](mailto:Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu).

### Christian Reflection

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# Divine Justice as Restorative Justice

While it contains retributive components, God's justice is fundamentally a restoring and renewing justice. Knowing this, the Church is obliged to practice restorative justice in its own ranks and to summons society to move in the same direction.

### Prayer

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 32:16-18

Responsive Reading: Psalm 89:1, 14-16

I will sing of your steadfast love, O LORD, forever;  
**with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations.**

Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne;  
**steadfast love and faithfulness go before you.**

Happy are the people who know the festal shout,  
who walk, O LORD, in the light of your countenance;  
**they exult in your name all day long,  
and extol your righteousness.**

### Reflection

The Bible says a lot about justice – both *social* justice that shares resources fairly and *criminal* justice that penalizes wrongdoing. Chris Marshall notes how closely these two are related: “If we took more seriously the biblical imperative to care for the poor and dispossessed, to avoid the unjust accumulation of wealth and power in the hands of the few, and to set at liberty those who are oppressed by debt or exploitation, we would have less cause to employ criminal sanctions against those on the margins of the community who feel they have no stake in society.”

With regard to criminal justice, the theme of retribution (or “paying back”) arises in Scripture at two points: only the *guilty* deserve punishment and their penalty should be *proportionate* to their wrongful deeds. Thus, retribution stands opposed to arbitrary and vengeful retaliation. Yet, “biblical teaching on justice is [not] wholly or solely controlled by some impersonal metaphysical principle of measure for measure. Instead it has a distinctively personal and relational character,” Marshall writes. “Criminal offending was considered wrong, first, because it breaches the relational commitments that hold society together and, second, because the wrongful deeds themselves unleash a disordering power in the community that threatens to trigger a chain-reaction of ruin and disaster unless it is arrested.”

He surveys four levels of the biblical material that reveal the fundamental relational and restorative character of God's justice.

- ▶ At the *linguistic level*, “justice” and “righteousness” overlap in meaning. They refer to a relation with God and others, not a trait one has on one's own. Wrongdoing is punished “to put right what has gone wrong, to protect the community, and to restore the integrity of its life and its relationship with God. Justice is satisfied by the restoration of peace to relationships, not by the pain of punishment per se” (cf. Isaiah 32:16-18).
- ▶ The *macro level* is “one large story of God's restorative justice at work.” God creates a world where we can live in right relation-



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ship with God, one another, and the wider creation, but we commit the crime of violating these relationships. “God, the righteous judge, sets in motion the long historical process of recovery” through Noah, Abraham, the nation of Israel, and, ultimately, Jesus Christ and the Church, that “liberates humanity from its subjection to the dominion of sin and death and renews human nature from the inside out.”

- ▶ On the *legislative level*, offenders are obligated to repair relationships and restore community. They must recognize their guilt and confess; repent (change direction) by making amends; provide restitution and more to their victims; and seek reconciliation with the injured parties and God.
- ▶ New Testament writers focus on the *ecclesial level*, guiding churches to treat offending members in ways that reflect God’s restorative justice in Christ (e.g., Galatians 6:1 and 2 Corinthians 2:6-8, 10-11). Yet the principles are meant to apply to society too, Marshall concludes. “If Paul were to come among us today, singing of God’s amazing grace on Sundays while on Mondays supporting, or being indifferent to, the retributive degradation of the present penal system, he would say what he said to the Ephesians who were being seduced by the standards of wider society: ‘That is not the way you learned Christ! For surely you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus’ (4:20-21). The truth of God’s justice is in Jesus, and that justice is a liberating and restoring justice. The Church fails in its vocation if it fails to proclaim, to embody, and to advocate the principles of restorative justice in every sphere of life.”

### Study Questions

1. The common idea that “the Bible articulates and endorses an essentially *retributive* conception of corrective justice” is only partly right, Chris Marshall says. What retributive elements does he find in the biblical material?
2. Why, according to Marshall, should we avoid “seizing on selected biblical texts or practices to do with justice” using them as proof texts for our views of justice?
3. How does each “level” in Marshall’s survey of the biblical material point in a holistic way toward restorative justice? What further questions do you have about each level?

### Departing Hymn: “Praise, My Soul, the King of Heaven” (verses 1 and 5)

Praise, my soul, the King of heaven,  
to his feet your tribute bring;  
ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven,  
evermore his praises sing.  
Alleluia! Alleluia! Praise the everlasting King.

Angels, help us to adore him,  
you behold him face to face;  
sun and moon, bow down before him,  
dwellers all in time and space.  
Alleluia! Alleluia! Praise with us the God of grace.

Henry Francis Lyte (1834)  
Tune: LAUDA ANIMA

# Divine Justice as Restorative Justice

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Question 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To discuss the meaning of “retribution” and identify retributive elements in the biblical account of justice.
2. To trace the theme of restorative justice in four levels of biblical material.
3. To reflect on the importance of interpreting Scripture in a holistic, canonical way.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Prison (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “Praise, My Soul, the King of Heaven” locate the familiar tune LAUDA ANIMA in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ ([www.hymntime.com/tch/](http://www.hymntime.com/tch/)).

## Begin with a Comment

“The Bible has a particular insight to offer on the question of justice. The Old Testament portrays God as just or righteous. Often the portrait is of God passing judgment on the unfaithfulness of his people. But God’s justice is not that of an impartial judge adjudicating between the claims of competing or conflicting peoples to achieve peace and harmony. It is manifest also in deeds that liberate the weak and vulnerable from bondage, and which require his people to act in ways conducive to human flourishing....”

“The traditional symbol of justice—as a blindfolded woman with a pair of scales—is thus not adequate. Biblical justice and legal justice are not one and the same thing. *True justice must have an inherent bias toward the marginalized, vulnerable or oppressed individuals in society.*” (The Catholic Bishops of England and Wales, *A Place of Redemption: A Christian Approach to Punishment and Prison* [2004], §§ 22-23. This document is available online at [www.catholic-ew.org.uk/Catholic-Church/Publications](http://www.catholic-ew.org.uk/Catholic-Church/Publications), accessed January 10, 2012).

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God for insight into divine righteousness and justice, and our call to participate in it.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Isaiah 32:16-18 from a modern translation.

## Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

## Reflection

Our starting point for reflection on the contemporary prison system is Chris Marshall’s survey of biblical teachings about corrective or criminal justice, the domain of justice that identifies and penalizes wrongdoing. He offers a holistic survey of the Bible, believing that its major themes of restorative justice—at the *linguistic level* of recurring terminology for justice, the *macro level* of the meta-narrative, the *legislative level* of particular instructions for dealing with wrongdoing, and the *ecclesial level* of church discipline—will help us interpret particularly difficult passages.

If your group would like to extend their study of the biblical teachings on criminal justice, see Chris Marshall's *Beyond Retribution: A New Testament Vision for Justice, Crime, and Punishment* (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001), which includes a careful discussion of passages on capital punishment. Kenneth Carder reviews this book in "Resources for Restorative Justice" (*Prison*, 89-93).

### Study Questions

1. Chris Marshall notes that "retribution" is a "confusing and misunderstood" concept. "When the word is used in isolation, it tends to evoke the idea of vengeance or retaliation. When it is paired with the word 'justice' however, it implies a more measured delivery of punishment as due recompense for wrongdoing." Only in the latter sense is retribution ever endorsed in Scripture. "Most basically, the Bible recognizes that human deeds carry inescapable consequences. There is a kind of inbuilt law of recompense in the universe that means people 'reap whatever they sow' (Galatians 6:7, cf. Ecclesiastes 10:8; Proverbs 1:32; 26:27; Psalm 7:15-16). In addition, the basic retributive concepts of guilt, desert, proportionality, and atonement are widely attested in the Old Testament legal and cultic system, and undergird moral and theological teaching in the New Testament as well. Furthermore, since God is inherently just, and God's judgments are never capricious, biblical accounts of divine judgment on sin, both within history and at the end of time, may also be regarded as demonstrations of retributive justice.... Accordingly, biblical justice is retributive justice insofar as it turns on the principles of moral culpability, measured recompense, and the rule of law."
2. Marshall gives two major reasons to avoid proof texting. First, we should humbly admit that our ability to understand justice is limited by our fallen nature. In Scripture "justice *does* have an objective existence, because justice derives from God (Deuteronomy 32:3-4; Psalm 89:14; 145:17), and God exists apart from human speculation," but "Just as our human capacity to know God and the truth about God is limited by sin (cf. Romans 1:18-23), so too is our capacity to know fully the nature of God's universal justice." Second, our ability to grasp the meaning of justice is limited by our creaturely finitude: we can only experience justice through the lens of our particular cultural and historical traditions. As a result, our knowledge "can only be partial, fallible, and provisional." These two reasons should make us cautious, though not despairing, in interpreting the biblical materials. The best approach is to read the Bible canonically, as an organized volume that communicates the story of God's grace that we learn about and live through the Church.
3. You can use Scripture reading and responsive reading passages to briefly survey what Marshall says about the *linguistic level*. If members are reminded of elements of the great story of Scripture as it is read by the Church (creation, rebellion, restoration through Israel, exile, restoration through the Church, consummation), they will understand Marshall's view of the *macro level*.

You might form smaller groups to investigate the Scripture passages related to the *legislative* and *ecclesial levels*. The group studying the legislative level should focus on Marshall's interpretation of Numbers 5:6-7, Leviticus 6:1-7, and Exodus 22:1, 4, and 9. Ask the group studying the ecclesial level to summarize his interpretation of Galatians 6:1 and 2 Corinthians 2:6-8, 10-11.

Members might have questions about each of these levels. Do these levels provide any direct instructions at all about criminal justice today? If not, do they suggest restorative justice principles that should guide our thinking about criminal justice? Are there particular passages that seem to conflict with these principles?

### Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.