

Justice for All  
Joshua 20

This is one passage of Scripture that is not at all difficult to understand. God had told Moses back in Numbers chapter 35 that when the children of Israel came into the land He had promised to give them, they were to set up six cities of refuge. So, when Joshua chapter 20 rolled around and the land was being apportioned to each of the tribes, the time had come to select exactly which cities would receive that designation. So the people selected Kedesh, Shechem and Hebron on the west side of the Jordan, to go along with Bezer and Ramoth and Golan, which, according to Deuteronomy chapter 4, Moses had already selected on the east side of the Jordan.

So much is clear, and it is equally obvious why the Israelites needed to set these cities apart for such a special purpose. Verse 3 reminds us that, in those days, people tended to look to their families, clans, and tribes for justice, and that sort of justice usually took the form of a vendetta. Simply put, if someone killed one of your relatives, you didn't take him to court – you gathered a posse of your cousins and went to settle the score.

So, in order to curb this kind of vigilante justice, and doubtless to prevent the feuds between families and clans that would inevitably follow, the Lord said that six cities of refuge should be set up. As verse 3 says, anyone who was accused of murder could flee to one of those cities and be protected until he could stand trial.

So much is clear, but what can we possibly learn from this passage? As far as I can tell, the last man to be lynched in Port Gibson was back in 1899. Today, our system of judgment seems to follow today's passage very closely. We try to insure that people have a right to a trial, and, when handing down sentences, judges tend to make distinctions between killing someone intentionally and unintentionally. So, if our justice system is already doing all this stuff, can't we just move on to the next chapter? Why do we need to read and study all these laws?

Well, the fact is that every part of the Bible is worthy of our study – after all, if God told the Israelites to do something, those commandments necessarily reflect His priorities and thus tell us a lot about Him. So even though this passage is obviously part of the civil law of Ancient Israel, its general principles are still important for us to know.

And the first of those principles is as obvious in its meaning as it is universal in its scope: Every human life is sacred – yes, every human life. Even those who kill another human being deserve to be protected from the ultimate injustice of a lynching. In fact, verse 4 says that those who have been accused of killing a man also deserve to be cared for and housed while they are waiting for trial.

But if the life of the accused is sacred, so is the life of the deceased. Numbers 35 spells this out in greater detail, making clear that even though a manslayer reached a city of refuge, he still had to stand trial. And if at that trial he was found to be a murderer, if it was shown that he intentionally killed his victim, then he himself was to be put to death.

So, what if the trial determined he didn't mean to kill the deceased? The manslayer still had to pay a high price for his carelessness – he had to stay in the city of refuge as long as the man currently serving as high priest was alive. In fact, if the manslayer ever left the boundaries of the city of refuge, he

became fair game for any of the deceased's family members who might want to string him up in spite of the outcome of the trial.

So, even if someone killed his neighbor unintentionally, he would have to endure what amounted to house arrest. That would have been a huge blow to the large majority of the population who were farmers or herdsman – if they couldn't go home to their fields and pastures, they were deprived of their livelihood, and their families were deprived of their labor. Moreover, the law made it clear that a manslayer couldn't just make a cash payment to the family of the deceased, even if they had been willing to accept it. No, he had to stay in the city of refuge until the high priest died.

And why was the death penalty prescribed for murder? Why was such an extreme form of house arrest prescribed even for an unintentional killing? The end of Numbers 35 explains: "Blood pollutes the land and no expiation can be made for the land for the blood that is shed on it except by the blood of him who shed it. And you shall not defile the land in which you live, in the midst of which I dwell; for I the Lord am dwelling in the midst of the sons of Israel."

And so we see the reason that all human life is to be held sacred – protecting human life somehow upholds and honors the holiness of God Himself. And that just makes sense when we look back at Genesis chapter 1, doesn't it? "God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them."

So, here's the bottom line: to kill a man, regardless of the reason or intention, is to destroy an image of God, to commit the ultimate sacrilege. So much is clear.

But what does all this mean for us? I mean, we've already seen that our legal system implements many of the ideas embodied by those ancient cities of refuge. We insist on jury trials for everyone. Those who kill others by mistake tend to receive lighter sentences than those who commit premeditated murder.

But that doesn't mean our laws don't have some room for improvement on this score. This week, Cory Godbolt is on trial in Magnolia for killing eight people – back in May of 2017. What ever happened to the right of a speedy trial? Are we treating the accused with the sort of compassion and dignity that this passage prescribes?

Also in the news this week, a Mississippi law that would ban most abortions after the baby's heartbeat can be heard was struck down by a federal judge. Can we really say that our American legal system upholds the sanctity of human life when well over 60 million Americans have been killed before having the chance to be born? If shedding man's blood pollutes a land, what do all those deaths have to say about us?

And lately, Mississippi's prison system has come under scrutiny for the way we house those who have been convicted of serious crimes. Now, I haven't been to Parchman to see what things are really like, but some of the pictures I've seen look pretty bad. So, if we're going to lock people up, maybe we need to make some changes in their living conditions. Maybe we Mississippians can learn something from this chapter after all – maybe we can do a better job of honoring the image of God in everyone.

But protecting human life isn't just about making or changing laws. After all, if we really think abortion is wrong, we shouldn't just advocate for the laws to be changed. We can also support the

Center for Pregnancy Choices in Vicksburg, which provides free pregnancy tests and ultrasound scans to help mothers make more informed decisions. Crisis pregnancy centers all over the country are making a real difference, bringing the abortion rate down in spite of our hostile legal climate.

And once these babies are born, there's more we can do. Many Christian families have opened their homes to take care of foster children or to adopt children that their mothers can't support. Maybe you can't go that far, but maybe you can help at-risk children in different ways – listening to them read at school, or taking them hunting or fishing, or showing them how to cook a favorite recipe. Volunteer as a Scoutmaster or a youth league coach or referee. Come to think of it, spending some time with their kids is a great way to help single parents too – most of them can use a break.

And how can we honor the image of God in those whose bad choices have landed them in prison? If you know someone like that, you can write letters. Even small gifts can make a big difference in their everyday lives, allowing them to make phone calls or get a snack between meals. You can support the Gideons as they place Bibles in prisons or you can support the work of Prison Fellowship, which facilitates Bible studies and other developmental opportunities for men and women behind bars, and provides Christmas gifts for their kids through the Angel Tree program. And once folks get back out on the streets, we can help them start over. We can treat them with dignity and do our best to give them a second chance.

And that leads us to the second great truth we can learn from this passage: if every human life is sacred, justice must be available to everyone. That's why there were six cities of refuge, not just one. Everyone in ancient Israel was living within about 20 miles of one of these cities – about as close as our county courthouses are to all the people of Mississippi today.

And we might think that, since we have such a comprehensive system of courts, and since we have so many sheriffs and deputies and police officers, so many prosecutors and public defenders located in so many places, there's nothing else we need to do. But the availability of justice isn't just a matter of geography. After all, in verse 9 it clearly states that cities of refuge were to be available not just to the Israelites, but to those of other nations who happened to be living among them. In the same way, we need to make sure that everyone receives justice, regardless of their race or creed or socioeconomic status.

That's a big part of what the Civil Rights Movement was about back in the 1960's. But even though black and white folks are now equal in the eyes of the law, there are still a lot of people who may not be getting a fair shake from our society. Maybe you know someone who's homeless because they're wrestling with mental illness and self-medicating with street drugs, even as more and more mental hospitals are closed down around the country. Maybe you know someone who can't find work because he doesn't have the skills or habits to get or keep a job, at least one that's worth the federally mandated minimum wage. Maybe you know a parent whose kids are trapped in a failing school but can't afford to move into a better school district. Can we really say that in America justice is for everyone?

So, what can we possibly do about all these social problems? Well, what were the residents of each of these cities of refuge expected to do? Verse 4 simply says they were to protect the people who came to them, take them into their city, make a place for them to live, and make sure they got a fair trial. In other words, they were to deal with these people and these problems one at a time.

And that's the best way for each of us to uphold the sanctity of human life and to promote justice for everyone – one mother, one child, one prisoner, one needy person at a time. For isn't that what Jesus told us to do in our responsive reading from Matthew 25? Didn't He tell us to feed the hungry and give the thirsty something to drink? Didn't he tell us to welcome the strangers and clothe the naked? Didn't He tell us to care for the sick and visit those who were in prison? In fact, didn't He say that serving the people that society considers to be the least important is actually the best way to serve Him?

So this week, instead of just worrying about all the headlines, let's ask God to show us opportunities to be part of the solution, to protect life, and to promote justice where we are, among the people we know. Isn't that what it really means to love our neighbors as ourselves?