

Magistralis

Your Eye Shall Not Pity

Greg Dickison



The civil magistrate is the minister of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer (Rom. 13:4). God has not left his civil minister without guidance on how to exercise his office. The Scriptures set forth clear standards of judgment for many offenses. Capital crimes, for example, include premeditated killing (murder), kidnapping, sorcery, bestiality, adultery, homosexuality, and cursing one's parents (Ex. 21:14; 21:16;

22:18; 22:19; Lev. 20:10; 20:13; Ex. 21:17).

In contemporary American jurisprudence, none of these offenses is punishable by death, with the occasional exception of murder. The magistrates have dispensed with God's standards of justice. Some Christians believe this is an improvement. They would be horrified to think that the "harsh" penalties of the law should still be applied. Sometimes this is the result of the mistaken belief that the Old Testament has no further application after the advent of Christ. This is an exegetical problem. Too often, it is the result of a sinful view of the criminal. This sin is called pity.

Pity is a compassionate and sympathetic response to another's distress. It manifests itself by some action deemed to be beneficent to the one who is the object of the pity. It is characterized by the thought, "There, but for the grace of God, go I." So what is wrong with that? Why is pity a sin?

First, pity is not *always* a sin. But neither is it always good. The Bible teaches that the moral character of pity depends on the context in which it is exercised.

He who has pity on the poor lends to the Lord, and He will pay back what he has given (Prov. 19:17). Pity toward the poor is good. David was condemned by God when he did not take pity on Uriah, a poor man (2 Sam. 12:110). David sought pity when he was under the reproach of his enemies (Ps. 69:20). It would have been a comfort to him in his adversity. If God had not taken pity on His people, we would all be lost in our sins (Is. 63:9).

There are also examples of God's refusal to have pity, as when Jerusalem defiled His sanctuary (Ez. 5:11). Likewise, God included in the law specific prohibitions against the exercise of pity in meting out punishment.

If your brother, the son of your mother, your son or your daughter, the wife of your bosom, or your friend who is as your own soul, secretly entices you, saying, "Let us go and serve other gods," . . . you shall not consent to him or listen to him, nor shall your eye pity him, nor shall you spare him or conceal him; but you shall surely kill him . . . (Deut. 13:69).

But if anyone hates his neighbor, lies in wait for him, rises against him and strikes him mortally, so that he dies, and he flees to one of these cities, then the elders of his city shall send and bring him from there, and deliver him over to the hand of the avenger of blood, that he may die. Your eye shall not pity him,

but you shall put away the guilt of innocent blood from Israel, that it may go well with you (Deut. 19:1113).

If a false witness rises against any man to testify against him of wrongdoing, then both men in the controversy shall stand before the Lord, before the priests and the judges who serve in those days. And the judges shall make diligent inquiry, and indeed, if the witness is a false witness, who has testified falsely against his brother, then you shall do to him as he thought to have done to his brother, so you shall put away the evil person from among you. Your eye shall not pity . . . (Deut. 19:1619, 21).

If two men fight together, and the wife of one draws near to rescue her husband from the hand of the one attacking him, and puts out the hand and seizes him by the genitals, then you shall cut off her hand; your eye shall not pity her (Deut. 25:11, 12).

The tendency of modern American law is to look at whether the particular *criminal* deserves the penalty involved. Witnesses are brought in (usually the defendant's mother) to say that Johnny is really a good boy who just got in with the wrong crowd and deserves another chance. Or the judge considers whether the accused is sorry for what he did. Those who side with the victim can go to the other extreme; the prosecutor is allowed to bring in witnesses to testify to what a great guy the victim was, or to the impact of the crime on the victim's family. Justice becomes a contest to see which side can generate the most pity.

God commands the judge to evaluate the *crime* rather than the criminal. If the crime is one for which God requires death, then death must be the punishment. Your eye *shall not pity*. Neither is the repentance of the accused relevant to the imposition of the sentence. When it was discovered that Achan had kept some of the spoil of Jericho, Joshua beseeched him to repent. *And Achan answered Joshua and said, 'Indeed, I have sinned against the Lord God of Israel, and this is what I have done . . . (Josh. 7:19-20).* After Achan confessed, he was still stoned to death.

Thus, the Bible teaches that pity is not an option where God has decided the matter. The magistrate, God's minister, is to faithfully execute justice according to God's standard, not man's.

What the Bible does *not* teach is that the preaching of the gospel and repentance have no place on death row. Indeed, it is hard to imagine a place where there is a more immediate need of grace, and a presentation of the gospel should be the first response of Christians to those who are condemned. But condemnation still must come if we are to be obedient to God's Word. We must respond to the wrongdoer biblically in both judgment and grace.

This means that we must return to an obedience which confines pity within the bounds which God has established for us.



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