

"I Alone Am Not Able to Bear You"

As you know, you are sitting in a Presbyterian church. What you might not know is that the word for Presbyterian most specifically refers to church government. The word presbyter in the Greek is the word for "elder." And so a presbyterian form of church government is one where the church is ruled by elders at various levels. Of course, as a denomination, we are distinct in many other theological ways besides just our form of church government. And many denominations that don't have the word "presbyterian" in their name actually have a presbyterian form of government.

But I bring this up, because often when we think about church government, we can look exclusively to the New Testament to define that for us. There are obviously a number of places in the New Testament where we find elders ruling the church. The letters of 1 Timothy and Titus even mention the process for selecting such elders. And so we often think about the practice of elders governing the church as something unique to the New Testament.

And yet, there is certainly an important role that elders played in the Old Testament, and in the nation of Israel. I think we overlook this, probably because the three offices of prophet, priest, and king, seem to get most of the attention in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, we see how all believers generally take on aspects of those three offices. And yet in the New Testament, it's our conviction that the church is to be governed by a plurality of elders. And I would submit to you, that we find that foundation of that even in seed form in the Old Testament. Though there are the popular offices of prophet, priest, and king, in the Old Testament, there are a number of places where we see elders taking on an important role in ruling and judging the people. This passage is one of them.

And so as we study this passage in its original context, I want us to see three things. First, we'll look at some practical principles we learn out of this passage for administering justice. Second, we'll see how God was working his divine authority and justice through these leaders in the old covenant. Third, we'll see how this ultimately reminds us of our need for Christ to be our head and judge. We'll close then by applying all of this to our own church government.

And so I'd like to look first then at some of the practical principles that we can get out of this passage for administering justice. And to do that, let me make an important qualification for us. Remember, that the nation of Israel was something unique. It was organized differently than how the church under the new covenant is organized. The nation of Israel was a theocracy. There was a very close connection of church and state. That's not the case for the New Testament church. The New Testament church is separate from the state. The church is now to reach out to all the nations with the gospel. The church on earth coexists with many other nations. The civil government has certain responsibilities that the church does not. For example, the civil government has the power of the sword, and at times uses that in things like capital punishment and in times of war. The church doesn't have that power. Its mission is chiefly spiritual. It's got the power of the sword of the Spirit, God's word. The state and the church are two different institutions in the New Testament. That wasn't the case in the Old Testament with the nation of Israel.

Consequently, the Old Testament has a number of laws that pertain to the civil government of Israel. There are laws that tell how the civil government should

enforce the laws using even the sword. The Westminster Standards give us a good principle for how to interpret such civil laws that we find in the Old Testament. It says that they are not binding on us. We don't live in the civil government of Israel. In fact, that civil government as it stood, no longer exists. God has not mandated other nations to pick up these civil laws in their own government. And so the Westminster Standard says that we are not bound by them, but we should learn from them. What principles of general equity do we find in them? These principles could then be wisely applied and used in today's civil governments. And of course, similarly, there can be things we can learn from them that help us in the church as well.

And so let's use that interpretive principle here for a moment. To the extent that the leaders being appointed here are to be concerned with civil justice, this exact form of government is not mandated on any nation or church. But what principles can we find here that could be wisely applied?

Well, there are several. First, things like you need more than just one person to effectively run a nation and to establish justice. Moses realized he couldn't do it all himself. Second, let the people have a say in who rules them. Here Moses in verse 13 tells the people to select the people to rule over them. Then Moses would assign them their specific responsibilities. That is certainly a principle of democracy and representative rule that we in America obviously cherish. Third, people should choose their leaders based on their skills. Verse 13 says that their leaders were to have wisdom and understanding and should be knowledgeable, in other words, experienced.

Fourth, rulers shouldn't have any partiality in their judgments. Moses commanded the leaders in verse 16 and 17 about this. They shouldn't have partiality between the small or the great. Neither should they have partiality between the citizen and the alien. We should not deprive anyone of justice. Fifth, we shouldn't give into fear of the people who we judge. Moses says in verse 17 that they shouldn't be afraid in any man's presence. Of course we know how this can happen. If you have to judge against a man with power, it can be scary. We can be tempted not to make the right judgment in fear of the consequences. Or along the same lines, we could be tempted to take bribes. But all of these things would be giving into the fear of man. Justice doesn't allow for that. Sixth, refer cases that are outside of your scope and ability. Don't issue a judgment if you don't have the answer. Refer it to someone who does. Moses tells the leaders to give him the harder cases in verse 18.

And so do you see how this short passage has quite a number of good practical principles on justice? All good principles of justice. These certainly could be used to help us in any civil government. To take this sort of wisdom from Scripture is completely appropriate. And yet as helpful as this kind of thinking is here, I would not want to stop just with this analysis.

Instead, I want us to think about what Moses is doing here in the context of redemptive history. God was working his divine authority and justice through these leaders in the old covenant. Remember the context. The Jews are just about to enter the Promised Land. Moses is just starting to remind them of the covenant that God had made with them at Mount Sinai. Just before they enter the Land, Moses would remind them of all the laws that they had to keep in their new kingdom. But of course, what good is it to have laws, if there is no one to help enforce them? Well, practically speaking, that's what Moses is addressing by appointing these leaders. These leaders will judge and rule the people according to the laws of the covenant. The covenant would be administered in part through these leaders.

In other words, these leaders shouldn't be ruling and judging based on whatever they personally think best. They are supposed to be leading based on the laws of the covenant. It was God's laws that they were supposed to be enforcing. They would be used essentially as God's representatives to the people. That's what Moses had been. And Moses was unique in that regard since God spoke so directly to Moses and Moses himself had personally received the laws from God in the first place. Surely there was no one better to go to than Moses to get the scoop on what God required. Surely there was no one better to go to than Moses to have God's law applied to a dispute that you had with someone. If God's law was the law of the land, then you needed someone able to understand and apply the provisions of the law to any particular situation.

That's what Moses had been doing, and that's what Moses needed help with. We get some helpful background to this event in Exodus 18. Exodus 18 is a parallel passage to what's going on here in Deuteronomy. Remember, Deuteronomy is recounting what God had already done among the people. Here Moses is remembering back to how he already established these leaders among the tribes and families. Well, Exodus 18 is the original record of this event happening. And in Exodus 18:15-16, Moses describes why the people come to him as judge. Moses said that they come to him to inquire of God in their dispute, and then have him make known the statutes of God and his laws concerning the situation. Then, after Moses described this in Exodus, he then has these other leaders under him appointed to do this very same thing.

In other words, my point is that the leaders that are appointed here are not making up their own rules and laws. They are being appointed to administer God's laws. They were bound by all the statutes and precepts that God had laid out in his covenant. They were servants of the covenant. That was their constitution. That was the basis for their judgments.

And so look at verse 17. Do you see why then Moses can say in verse 17 that the judgment is God's? This describes their authority. When the judges made a ruling, it wasn't just their personal opinion. It was the law of God applied to the specific situation. They were never to act alone. That's what's implied here by Moses telling them not to be afraid in anyone's presence, since the judgment is God's. What's implied is that they must judge according to God's Word. When that was the basis for their ruling, then that made their ruling authoritative. This is what we call "declarative" authority. Declarative authority. They were to declare and apply God's standards, not make up new ones. To the degree that these judges were faithful to God's Word, then they came with the authority of God. If the basis for their judgments was God's word, then the authority for their judgment was from God as well. And so, their rule came with divine authority, to the degree that it was faithful to God's Word.

But of course, if the case was too hard, these leaders could go to Moses. That's what the last part of verse 17 says. You have to remember that Moses stood in a different place than the rest of these many judges. For the most part, these many leaders would be dealing with the revealed Word of God. They judged from the revelation that had been given. But Moses was in regular contact with God. If there was something too difficult even for him, in theory he could go to the Lord and inquire. Moses was God's prophetic representative to the people. God had selected Moses to bring his Word to Israel. That's a pretty exalted role. Who else was like Moses? That's even how the book of Deuteronomy ends. Deuteronomy 34:10 says that since that time, there has never arisen another prophet like Moses in Israel, who knew the LORD so closely. I wonder if during Moses' lifetime, some people wondered if Moses was the Messiah. Remember, God had promised to Adam and Eve to raise up a seed of the woman to conquer the seed of the serpent. Who else

was like Moses? Used by God in such an amazing way. And yet, as wonderful of a position that Moses was in, I submit to you that he was not the Christ. We see that here in our passage.

Actually, here in our passage, we see how Moses was a type of Christ, but not actually the Christ. Christ is the ultimate judge and head. Moses obviously played that role in part here to the people. But Moses fell short in his ability to be the judge and head. We know that by Moses' own confession. Verse 9. Moses said, "I alone am not able to bear you." Verse 12. How can I alone bear your problems and your burdens and your complaints?" We can understand this. How could one man be the judge of a people that had grown so big, and was only getting bigger? God had promised that they'd be as numerous as the stars of heaven, and that was already the case! How could one man effectively judge so many? How could one man rule all these people? In the original Exodus account, it was Jethro, Moses' father-in-law who gave him the practical wisdom to appoint other leaders below him. That was good practical advice. One man couldn't do it all, could he?

Well, I hope you see how this serves to point us to Christ. Moses was a type of Christ. Moses was the judge and head of the people, at least in a representative sense. He represented God as the final judge and head of the people. But Moses was not able to do it all himself. He had aspects of him that looked like the Christ, but his limitations show that he was not the Christ. Christ is the final judge and head of his people.

Of course, even all these leaders who were appointed under Moses in this passage, they themselves looked forward to Christ. As they together served to lead and rule the people, they looked forward to the Christ who would lead and rule the people. But they too fell short. They themselves would not be as faithful to God's Word as they should. They would end up perverting justice. How do I know this? Just think of a passage like Isaiah 1:21. The prophet Isaiah describes the state of justice in Jerusalem saying, "How the faithful city has become a whore, she who was full of justice!" Obviously these leaders who were appointed in the land, and their descendants, didn't end up doing that good of a job. Isn't that the case we saw throughout Israel's history? All the judges and all the kings don't keep justice in the land. So much sin, so much corruption, so much lack of justice. That had to be a reflection in part at least with these elders who had been appointed as judges and heads over the people.

Who would bring true justice? Who would bring true leadership? Who could ensure that "justice [would] roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream?" Jesus Christ. Jesus would, and did, and continues to do today. But when we think about Jesus being the great judge, this is something we especially think about in connection with Christ's second coming. At his second coming, Christ will judge the world. As the apostle's creed confesses, Jesus will come to judge the living and the dead. That's a truth taken from 2 Timothy 4:1. We read in John 5 that God the Father has entrusted this final judgment to the Son. That's Jesus. Jesus will ultimately come at the end of history to right all the wrongs, to deal definitively with sin and injustice. God says, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." That will ultimately happen on the final day of reckoning. At the Great White Throne Judgment. Justice will be served, and it will be a righteous judgment.

And yet, Jesus clarifies this a bit in John chapter 12. Jesus distinguishes between his two comings. The second coming he will be coming to judge at the last day. But at his first coming, he did not come to judge, Jesus says in John 12:47. It says that he did not come to "judge the world, but to save the world."

Well, we know how Jesus did this. We know how he came to save the world. He did not do it by circumventing justice. He didn't do it out of his own personal privilege. He did it in a way that was fully keeping with divine justice. He couldn't just overlook sin against the almighty God. Justice had to be served. And so on the cross he took on the sins of his people. He paid the penalty for our sins. Justice was served on that day of Calvary. At the cross, he died for the sins of whomever would trust in him by faith. And so I urge you all, trust in Jesus for salvation. Look to the cross and find the forgiveness of your sins. Each of us has sinned against God throughout our life. We are each under a just judgment. We each deserve nothing less than hell. If this hasn't been dealt with by the time we die, or before Jesus returns, then we will have to answer for this at Jesus' second coming. At that great final day of judgment. When the Lord Jesus sits in judgment of the world. At that day, what you heard today will be part of the evidence against you. You have heard it today. There is forgiveness of sins in Jesus. If you turn your life over to him today, you won't be found guilty on that final judgment. You'll be acquitted. You'll be acknowledged as being fully justified. If you are united to Christ, then your judgment has already been satisfied on the cross.

Jesus Christ is deeply concerned about justice. At his second coming, he will bring final justice. And even in his first coming, he brought justice. Justice upon himself as he stood in the place of so many guilty and condemned sinners like you and me. And if he cares about justice at these two points, don't you think he always cares about justice? Well, he does. That's why under the old covenant, he worked through Moses and these many men appointed to lead and rule. Yes, our Lord allowed their human sinfulness to pervert justice from time to time. That was intended to point them to their need for a savior, for a Messiah who would not pervert justice. It should have caused them and us to long for Jesus to come, the great king and head of his church. But he still nonetheless had Moses and these elders in the Old Testament serve in this judicial capacity. They were administering God's Word among the covenant people.

And so, if that was the case back then, certainly it is still the case today that Jesus cares about justice. Jesus still is concerned for his law to be applied *today* among his church. That is why in the New Testament church we see a mechanism setup that is somewhat similar to what we see in the Old Testament. In the New Testament church, Jesus rules his church through the ordained elders; men selected by the people and then approved and appointed to service by the existing elders of the church.

This was all a part of Jesus' institution. When he ascended up into heaven, he said that all authority was given to him, and then sent out the apostles to establish his church. These apostles were entrusted with the authority of Jesus, specially commissioned to found the New Testament church. And they in turn entrusted the authority to rule and judge to elders. We read about this service of elders in a number of places in the New Testament. For example, Acts 15 shows a council of apostles and elders gathering to decide on an issue together, and even the apostles themselves submit to this decision. The books of 1 Timothy and Titus lay out the qualifications for selecting elders, for example. And yet the idea of this rule by elders finds its roots even back in the Old Testament in passages like this. God has always cared about justice, and we find him regularly using his saints to be an instrument of his justice.

And Paul in 1 Corinthians 5 even says that the saints will one day judge the earth. That's his basis for why they should be able to decide on the cases that are before them, instead of taking the disputes to those outside the church. That's pretty amazing. Somehow the way God uses elders now to rule and judge in the church,

anticipates how God will one day use the saints in judging the world, presumably along with Christ! What an amazing privilege. And I think this passage in 1 Corinthians 5 suggests that all Christians, whether you're an ordained elder or not, have some interest and responsibility to be about peacemaking. About administering justice according to God's Word.

Saints of God, if you have a dispute among a fellow member of the church, then you're called to work it out together. To see justice happen, according to biblical principles. And if you can't work it out amongst yourself, bring along an extra witness or two and again speak with the person that you are in a dispute with. Seek peace and reconciliation. But if you still aren't able to work it out, come to the elders. Bring the matter to us. That is part of our responsibilities that God has entrusted to us. We are to be about peacemaking and about church discipline. These so often go hand-in-hand. When we can work justice according to God's Word in a situation, it's for the goal of bringing biblical peace and reconciliation. A large part of that is to help anyone who's sinning in a matter to recognize this. Then they can confess their sins and turn back to the Lord in obedience. Sometimes that doesn't happen, and it requires the elders to exercise church discipline against a person. The goal of church discipline is also so that this wayward brother or sister would turn back to God.

All of this must be done in love. The elders of the church must do this without partiality. We must judge in a situation according to the Word of God. And as we do that, the judgment comes from God. Just like here in Deuteronomy, our authority is declarative. We declare the Word of God. That's the only source of our authority. To the extent that our judgment is faithful to declare the Word of God, it's to be received as the judgment of God. Christ continues to lead and rule in his church through ordained men. And so far as we lead biblically, it's Christ working through us. He's the ultimate Judge and Head of the church.

And so I'd encourage you. Make use of the elders. Of course, just as Moses couldn't do it all by himself, the same is even more true for your pastor. One pastor can't do it all either. Marlin and Jeff are wise, understanding, and knowledgeable elders. Whenever we finish up our session meetings, I always leave thinking how grateful I am that God has blessed this church with elders like this. Make use of them! Come to them with your struggles and conflicts. Engage them. And when they come to you, receive their leadership.

And by extension, I'd add the same for our deacons in their specific area of service. Their function is a little different of course than the elders. Their role is a ministry of mercy and compassion, particularly in people's earthly and temporal needs. But if you have such needs, go to them. Let them know your needs, and they are there to help!

God has given us leaders for a reason. Let's use them. And to the degree that the ministry of the elders and deacons are a blessing, give God the glory, because you are seeing Christ at work in his church. Amen.

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