

Human Courts

Exodus 22:7–14, Luke 12:13–21

In a sinful world there are bound to be disagreements between people. Many of these disagreements get solved informally. People generally learn to live together in relative peace in spite of their differences. Some are so intractable that one party or the other says, “I’ll see you in court!”

I have four points this morning: (1) Human courts; (2) Just judgment; (3) Perfect judgment; (4) Application to Christian worship. First,

1. Human courts

Observe that our text uses the phrase “the judges” three times: “the master of the house shall be brought to *the judges*” (v. 8); later, “the cause of both parties shall come before *the judges*; and whomever *the judges* condemn shall pay double to his neighbor” (v. 9). The meaning is that the matter should come before a human court to be heard by lawfully-appointed judges. According to the Bible, human judges and human courts are duty-bound to render *just* judgments, modeling the true God. Many, of course, fall short, as we know. There are judges whose rulings further a particular agenda rather than an impartial commitment to truth and the rule of law. Activists go “judge-shopping”—finding a judge who is more likely to hand down a ruling favorable to their cause.

Bible translations differ here. Instead of the wording “. . . shall be brought to *the judges*,” maybe your translation has something like “. . . shall be brought to *the gods*” (Douay-Rheims) or “. . . shall come near to *God*” (ESV). “Judges,” “the gods,” “God”—all are possible translations. How do we account for such differences?

First, understand that this is a matter of translation (and biblical interpretation). It is *not* a textual difference. Let me explain as best I can without getting too technical.

The Hebrew word is אֱלֹהִים. This is the common Hebrew word for *God*. In the KJV the word אֱלֹהִים is translated “God” (the true God) 2,346 times, “god” (with a small “g”) 244 times, and “judges” five times.¹ A little background: the word אֱלֹהִים is plural in form, usually understood as the plural of majesty—God is so glorious and majestic that he transcends all human understanding and even normal grammatical usage. The *’im* ending is the common plural ending. Theologically, the plural ending may imply the Persons of the Trinity: there is one God, eternally existing in three Persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Hebrew plural certainly allows for this. In our present text the word אֱלֹהִים has the *article*: הָאֱלֹהִים. This can mean *the* God, as a way of emphasizing the true God, as in the Israelites’ response to the miracle of the fire coming down from heaven to consume Elijah’s

¹ Strong’s Enhanced Concordance, אֱלֹהִים (Logos Bible Software)

waterlogged sacrifice: “The LORD, He is God! The LORD, He is God!” (1 Kgs. 18:39, literally “The LORD, He is *the* God! The LORD, He is *the* God!”). But in some contexts it can mean the *judges*, as in Psalm 82 (you may want to turn there for a moment): “God [אֱלֹהִים] stands in the congregation of the mighty [אֱלֹהִים, the shortened form of אֱלֹהִים]; he judges among the gods [אֱלֹהִים].” Here we have the exact same word translated two different ways in the same expression: “God” and “the gods” (small “g”). The context shows that the true God judges *human* judges, specifically judging those who “judge *unjustly*”—obviously fallible humans, since the true God *never* judges unjustly. The Psalm concludes with the words “I said, ‘You (plural) are gods [אֱלֹהִים], and all of you are children of the Most High. But you shall die like men, and fall like one of the princes.’ Arise, O God [אֱלֹהִים], judge the earth; for You (singular) shall inherit all nations.” Notice particularly in the last sentence that the word God (plural in form: אֱלֹהִים) uses a singular pronoun and verb: “*thou shalt inherit* all nations” (KJV).

Applying this background to our text this morning (“the master of the house shall be brought to the *judges* . . . the cause of both parties shall come before the *judges* . . . whomever the *judges* condemn shall pay double to his neighbor”) we see that when there is a dispute between members of a community, it is appropriate for the matter to be brought before a human court.

The ESV, following the example of the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, dating from 200 BC), translates אֱלֹהִים (literally “God” or “the gods”) as “God.” Lancelot Brenton’s translation of the Septuagint has: “but if the thief be not found, the master of the house shall come forward before *God*, and shall swear that surely he has not wrought wickedly in regard of any part of his neighbor’s deposit” But how can an accused person come before God? In this present age, only in a representative sense: that is, before human priests or judges who *represent* God—a civil or ecclesiastical court, if you will. Remember that our Exodus text is dealing with instructions to judges. The larger context of the Bible makes clear that all human beings will one day stand personally before the exalted Christ. “When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. *All the nations will be gathered before Him*, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats” (Matt. 25:31–32). “We shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ” (Rom. 14:10). “We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad” (2 Cor. 5:10).

Since in this present age no accused person can come directly before God, I believe it is helpful to translate our text as the KJV and NKJV: “the master of the house shall be brought to the *judges*.” Wycliffe’s translation (1382—643 years

ago!) helpfully gives: “If the thief is hid, the lord of the house shall be brought *to God, that is, judges.*”²

Our text, therefore, is dealing with human courts. It is best, of course, to conduct oneself in such a way to avoid entirely going to court. Jesus said, “Agree with your adversary quickly, while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge, the judge hand you over to the officer, and you be thrown into prison” (Matt. 5:25). It is best for people to come to terms without going to court, but in the event that court cannot be avoided, then here are instructions for human judges, so that their rulings might reflect the mind of God. That brings us to point two,

2. Just judgment

Note how our text begins: “If a man delivers to his neighbor money or articles to keep, and it is stolen out of the man’s house, if the thief is found, he shall pay double. If the thief is not found, then the master of the house shall be brought to the judges to see whether he has put his hand into his neighbor’s goods.” Here, a man gives his neighbor some of his property for safekeeping. This implies that there was a relationship of trust between the two of them: the man who loaned his goods trusted his neighbor; otherwise, he would not have entrusted them to his neighbor.

Notice how relevant this law is in the twenty-first century. If my neighbor comes to me and asks to borrow a tool, I must make a decision: What is my relationship with that neighbor? Has he proven trustworthy in the past? How important is the item to me? If the item is damaged, am I willing to write off the loss?

If two neighbors cooperate, both can benefit. If I loan a tool to a neighbor and he returns it in good condition, I have saved him from going out and purchasing the tool himself, or paying for a rental. Maybe the next time *I* will be on the receiving end.

I remember once loaning a power tool to a neighbor. He left it outside in the rain, and it became rusted and wouldn’t work anymore. I was trying to be a good neighbor. I wanted to be a good witness to his family. But he ruined my tool, and it was damaged such that it was of no use to me anymore. It was not of such value that I was willing to go to court. In that particular situation I decided to eat my loss, but I made a mental note not to loan valuable tools to that particular neighbor again.

On the other hand, I have in rare instances loaned an item to a stranger and gotten it back in better shape than when I lent it. One time I lent my lawnmower, and the user returned it with the blade carefully sharpened. It actually worked better than it had when I lent it to him.

² Spelling modernized

In instances such as these it is the responsibility of both lender and borrower to assess whether such an exchange is mutually beneficial.

What if I loan a valuable tool to a neighbor and it is stolen from him? The neighbor comes to me and says, “Here are the circumstances: I was using the item in my yard. I went in for the night, and when I returned in the morning, it was gone. I have no idea who took it. I reported the theft to the police but have heard nothing.” Remember, I had already assessed the man’s character and had voluntarily loaned the item to my neighbor. Now it is stolen. What does our text say? “If the thief is found, he shall pay double.” Remember, under biblical law crime does not pay. If the thief is apprehended he must return the item *plus* the value of a second like item. On the other hand, if the thief is *not* found, and the owner insists on taking it to court, “then the master of the house shall be brought to the judges to see whether he has put his hand into his neighbor’s goods.” Going to court is going to be costly in terms of time and trouble and money, but it is the lender’s right to go this route if he desires. Maybe he is convinced that his neighbor, whom he formerly trusted, has egregiously violated his trust. Maybe he has decided that his neighbor is no longer deserving of his friendship. Maybe he considers the matter of such importance that he wants to make an example out of him. But if the matter goes to court, the judge’s responsibility is to carefully consider the facts of the case, weigh the evidence, and render just judgment. He must not decide the case based on the personal likability of one party over the other. He must not rule based on the possibility of a future benefit to himself. His responsibility is to judge with equity and justice.

This brings me to point three,

3. Perfect judgment

Where we see just judgment exemplified perfectly is in the character of our Lord Jesus Christ. Israel had a preview of this character—albeit imperfect—in the patriarch Abraham. Remember what the LORD said about Abraham? “I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the LORD, *to do justice and judgment* [לַעֲשׂוֹת צְדָקָה וּמִשְׁפָּט]” (Gen. 18:19). The concepts of justice and judgment were known to Israel even before Sinai, as godly fathers and mothers had told and retold the stories of their forefathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to their children. The children of Israel were to learn to keep the way of the LORD, to do justice and judgment in their interpersonal dealings. So should we all! Here is a universal human responsibility—not just that of civil or ecclesiastical judges. All of us should learn to practice justice and judgment. That is not a skill we are born with. It is one we must learn, as we attend to the ordinary means of grace—the Word, the sacraments and prayer. All of us should learn to walk in integrity before the LORD. This is the character of God himself: “*Justice and judgment* are the habitation of thy throne” (Ps. 89:14).

This is the character perfectly exemplified in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. He is rightly called “Jesus Christ the righteous” (1 John 2:1). The word “righteous” (δίκαιος) can be translated *just*. Preaching about the Christ, the martyr Stephen spoke of “the coming of the Just One” (Acts 7:52); the word he uses is the same: δίκαιος (*just*).

The consistent message of Scripture is that God is righteous, and we are not. “All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). No matter how hard we try, we cannot attain to God’s standard of absolute perfection. We fall short of it day by day. The Lord Jesus Christ alone is the Just one. Justice and judgment are the habitation of his throne. At the final day “he will judge the world in righteousness” (Acts 17:31). We can be absolutely sure of this. He will not fail! God requires that human judges judge with just judgment. If they are not born again, they cannot possibly do this.

Christians must learn to be countercultural. We must make every effort self-consciously to reject the mindset and philosophy of the world. We must do this out of principle. The world is not a friend of grace. The world, the flesh and the devil are mortal enemies that war against our soul. The Prince of the power of the air wants to destroy us and take us with him to hell. There can be no compromise. Our responsibility is to cast down arguments and every philosophy that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing our every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. “All idols underfoot be trod, the LORD is God, the LORD is God.”

On a personal level, we are to love our neighbor. If he is not a follower of Christ, we cannot adopt his mindset or worldview, but we can and should love him as a person. The Bible tells us, “If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men” (Rom. 12:18). Living in peace is the ideal. If my neighbor wants to live at peace with me, then I should want to live at peace with him.

Coming to the Lord’s table is an expression of the church’s desire to live at peace. We who commune at the Lord’s table are publicly expressing a desire to live at peace. We are saying, “Rather than insisting on our own way, we will commit ourselves to Christ as our shield and our defender. At the final day he will right all wrongs and administer perfect justice.” We know that we shall receive perfect justice at the last day, so we do not need to make it our chief aim to protect ourselves.

As you hear about current events, does it upset you to hear about court decisions that are plainly in open defiance against the God of heaven—decisions that will harm the righteous and embolden the wicked? This state of affairs should not surprise us, beloved. Psalm 2 plainly speaks of out-of-control human leaders: “Why do the nations rage, and the people plot a vain thing? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against

His Anointed, saying, ‘Let us break Their bonds in pieces and cast away Their cords from us.’” Some of the rulers that plot against the LORD are human judges. They plot against the righteous, but their real target is the Lord Jesus Christ, the mediatorial King. They, like the covenant-breaking Jews of the first century, refuse to submit to Christ. The Jews of Jesus’ day said, “We will not have this man to rule over us”—and neither will rebellious human judges.

As Christians, when we hear of such things, our hearts break. We envision a world where peace reigns—where there is love and brotherhood and prosperity and dignity. But though we grieve, we do not lose heart. As we go on in Psalm 2, we find that the kingdom of Christ ultimately prevails. All are urged to “Kiss the Son,” lest they be on the wrong side of human history. One day *every* knee shall bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. That is the Word of God.

Lastly, let’s consider the

4. Application to Christian worship

We have been considering human courts. I’ve got to confess that until I studied for this particular sermon I never made the connection between human courts of justice and the courts of heaven, where the saints are transported to worship. The words *court* and *courts* occur almost 150 times in Scripture. Obviously, they are a very large theme.

What is a court? *An enclosed space where the judge rules.* In the tabernacle there was a series of courts: the outer courtyard where the animal sacrifices were offered, then the “tent of the testimony” (Num. 9:15) or “tabernacle of witness” (Num. 17:8), which contained two courts: the holy place, where the priests brought the blood of the sacrifices and sprinkled it upon the table of showbread; and the most holy place, where only the high priest could enter, and that only once a year. God is holy, and man must come into his presence only on *his* terms. The courts of the tabernacle were courts for *worship*, but they were also, and by necessity, courts of *judgment*. Whenever God’s people draw near to worship, they are under the all-seeing eye of God’s judgment. “The eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward him” (2 Chron. 16:9).

The saints must always worship in the manner which God himself appoints in his Word. We are to do the things that he tells us to do, and we are to *not* do anything that he has *not* told us to do. In Christian worship the Word of God reigns supreme.

When we worship, we enter the courts of heaven. We are to “seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God.” We are to set our minds on things above, not on things on the earth. When we come into the presence of God we must have confidence that our sins are washed away by the

precious blood of Christ, and that we are clothed in the robes of Christ's righteousness. After all, we are entering the court of the living God!

Our morning hymns today all use the word *court*: "Let us now a blessing seek, waiting in his *courts* today"; "O enter then his gates with joy, within his *courts* his praise proclaim!"; "How blest the man you've chosen to bring within your *courts*"; "My flesh is longing, fainting, thy sacred *courts* to see"; "Here's my heart, O take and seal it, seal it for thy courts *above*."³ The Judge rules!

God alone renders perfect, eternal justice, from which there is no appeal. Human courts, which render imperfect, temporal justice, are to mirror the divine court. But God has ordained that his people have temporal justice—albeit imperfect—for such is far superior to anarchy or totalitarianism. Let us pray for human judges everywhere, that they might learn submission to the God of heaven, that the church might prosper, wafting its wholesome influence upon this sinful world. Amen.

³ *Trinity Psalter Hymnal* 152, 100B, 65A, 84C, 429