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From America

POINTS OF JUSTICE

by **Ronald W. Nikkel**

*Do what is just and right.
Rescue from the hand of his oppressor,
the one who has been robbed.
Do no wrong or violence to the alien,
the fatherless or the widow,
and do not shed innocent blood in this place ¹
But let justice roll on like a river,
righteousness like a never-failing stream. ²*

"Revenge" declared Sir Francis Bacon ³ "is a kind of wild justice." It is an instinctive reaction by those who suffer loss or pain to retaliate against their offenders. Retaliation left unchecked, can result in the escalating cycle of violence that Rene' Girard ⁴ termed "mimetic violence" - reciprocal violence that is directed at either the offender or a scapegoat. Such "tit for tat" avenging of pain for pain and loss for loss may satisfy the victims' anger, yet revenge itself neither alleviates the inflicted damage nor brings the offender into accountability. And in the process, the levels of violence, anger and fear in society increase. Justice is not fulfilled.

The call to do justice in society is simultaneously one of protecting those who are vulnerable, suppressing evil, and fostering community well-being. Since primitive times, societies have established rules and created systems and procedures to protect the social order and well-being of its people. Yet, what originates in our human yearning for dependable justice inevitably becomes corrupted when people manipulate those laws and systems for their own benefit, causing others to be victimized by the very laws and systems that were designed to protect them. In *Unmasking the Powers*, Walter Wink points out, "When the laws of society become ends in themselves

rather than the means to the fulfilment of persons, then the laws breed rebellion and circumvention that jeopardize the very social stability that the laws exist to promote." ⁵

In our imperfect world of vested interests and competing powers, greed and violence, inequity and abuse, we continue to thirst for justice that will satisfy. We continue hoping, praying, and working for justice that will roll down like refreshing thirst-quenching waters for all people...

Let justice roll down to restrain evil and violence through fair laws, trustworthy law enforcement, and equitable judgment - justice that will not make a mockery of truth but uphold the highest standards of decency, respect, and order.

Let justice roll down to rescue the vulnerable, those who are weak and poor and marginalized - justice that will not be partial to wealth and power, but bring relief to all who are victimized at the hands of offenders and impersonal institutions.

Let justice roll down to reprove offenders, by rebuking all evil and holding violators accountable for their actions - justice that measures out retribution with kindly, proportional intent toward the correction and reformation of offenders.

Let justice roll down to resolve damages caused by offenders - justice that serves not just to punish wrong-doers but to provide care and reparation to victims in redressing the loss they've suffered.

Let justice roll down to restore peace and well-being in the community and between offenders and those who have been victimized - justice that seeks and supports the reconciliation of broken relationships, the healing of victims, and the restoration of offenders as responsible members of the community.

Crime is not merely a violation of the law, but a violation of individuals and the community. Some criminality causes incalculable damage. Consider the magnitude of heinous crimes against humanity like genocide, terrorism, and slavery. Consider also the horrific trauma of murder, rape, kidnapping, child abuse, and multiples thereof. A primary point of justice is to restrain such evil by way of laws and by way of penalties for violation. Offenders must be held accountable and take responsibility for their

wrongdoing. But the point of justice is not only prescriptive and punitive it is also curative. While there are crimes and times when the primary point of justice must be one of retribution in response to grievous assaults on the moral order and well-being of society, justice must also be an agent for preserving peace in the community and restoring those who have been victimized as well as their offenders.

*... clenched fists hinder perception of the justice of others
and thereby reinforce injustice;
...open arms help detect justice behind the front of seeming injustice
and thereby reinforce justice.
To agree on justice...
you must want more than justice;
you must want embrace.
There can be no justice without the will to embrace...
there can be no genuine and lasting embrace without justice.* ⁶

References

- 1 Jeremiah 22:3
- 2 Amos 5:24
- 3 English philosopher and jurist of the 16th Century who served both as Lord Chancellor and Attorney General of England
- 4 Rene Girard, "Violence and the Sacred" (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979)
- 5 Walter Wink, "Unmasking the Powers" (Fortress Press, 1986; page 151)
- 6 Miroslav Volf, "Exclusion and Embrace" (Abingdon Press, 1996; page 21)

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