

Desiring God - God centered resources from the ministry of John Piper

By John Piper

Terrorism, Justice, and Loving Our Enemies

September 12, 2001

Someone asked me after our Tuesday prayer service in response to the terrorist attack, "Can we pray for justice, and yet love our enemy at the same time?" The answer is yes.

But let's start with our own guilt. Christians know that if God dealt with us only according to justice, we would perish under his condemnation. We are guilty of treason against God in our sinful pride and rebellion. We deserve only judgment. Justice alone would condemn us to everlasting torment.

But God does not deal with us only in terms of justice. Without compromising his justice he "justifies the ungodly" (Romans 4:5). That sounds unjust. And it *would* be if it were not for what God did in the life and death of Jesus Christ. The mercy of God moved him to send the Son of God to bear the wrath of God so as to vindicate the justice of God when he justifies sinners who have faith in Jesus. So we have our very life because of mercy *and* justice (Romans 3:25-26). They met in the cross.

So we are not quick to demand justice unmingled with mercy. Jesus demands, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Mathew 5:44-45). And, of course Jesus modeled this for us as a perfect man. "*While we were enemies* we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son" (Romans 5:10). And even as he died for his enemies he prayed, "*Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing*" (Luke 23:34).

So the resounding command of the apostles is, "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. . . . Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. . . . Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay,' says the Lord. 'But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink'" (Romans 12:14-20). When we live this way we magnify the glory of God's mercy and the all-satisfying Treasure that he is to our souls. We show that because of his supreme value to us, we do not need the feeling of personal vengeance in order to be content.

But it does not compromise this truth to say that God should also be glorified as the one who governs the world and delegates some of his authority to civil states. Therefore some of God's divine rights as God are given to governments for the purposes of restraining evil and maintaining social order under just laws. This is what Paul means when he writes, "There is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. . . . [This authority is] a minister of God to you for good . . . it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil" (Romans 13:1-4).

God wills that human justice hold sway among governments, and between citizens and civil authority. He does not prescribe that governments always turn the other cheek. The government "does not bear the sword for nothing." Police have the God-given right to use force to restrain evil and bring law-breakers to justice. And legitimate states have the God-given right to restrain life-threatening aggression and bring criminals to justice. If these truths are known, this God-ordained exercise of divine prerogative would glorify the justice of God who mercifully ordains that the flood of sin and misery be restrained in the earth.

Therefore, we will magnify the *mercy* of God by praying for our enemies to be saved and reconciled to God.

At the personal level we will be willing to suffer for their everlasting good, and we will give them food and drink. We will put away malicious hatred and private vengeance. But at the public level we will also magnify the *justice* of God by praying and working for justice to be done on the earth, if necessary through wise and measured force from God-ordained authority.

Seeking to magnify ALL of God's glories,

Pastor John

©Desiring God

Permissions: You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that you do NOT alter the wording in any way, you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, and you do not make more than 1,000 physical copies. For web posting, a link to this document on our website is preferred. Any exceptions to the above must be explicitly approved by Desiring God.

Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: By John Piper. ©Desiring God. Website: www.desiringGod.org (<http://www.desiringGod.org>). Email: mail@desiringGod.org (<mailto:mail@desiringGod.org>). Toll Free: 888.346.4700.