

November 11, 2018 – Hebrews 9:24-28

How much punishment is enough punishment? That question is being raised in many quarters of our society for a lot of different reasons.

For example, the #MeToo movement has caused it to be brought up many times. How much do you punish someone whose offenses are decades old? How much do you punish someone who did something totally disgusting, but not necessarily criminal? How much do you punish someone when there's only evidence is one person's word against another's? From Hollywood celebrities and professional sports stars to politicians and Supreme Court Justices, we've had to ask these questions a lot recently.

We're dealing with it as a nation in regards to drug offenses too. Our country's prisons are filled beyond capacity with young men who are serving sentences of 10, 20, even 30 years for drug possession. These are punishments usually reserved for the most violent offenders. And yet, they knew the punishment when they bought or sold those drugs. So how much punishment is enough?

I could list a dozen more issues like this. But, sufficed to say, it's a question we must wrestle with regularly. How much punishment is enough punishment? When do we stop punishing someone and simply say, "You've paid for your crime. You can go back to your job. You can rejoin society."

Of course, ancient Israel had a very simple guideline in that regard. Leviticus 24 tells us, *"If anyone injures his neighbor, as he has done, it shall be done to him, fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; whatever injury he has given a person shall be given to him."*

It's pretty straightforward. You get caught stealing sheep, you must give a sheep in restitution. You assault someone and beat them up, you get assaulted and beaten. You murder someone, you get executed. And for those cases that don't fit neatly into this system, there's always things like financial restitution and hard labor and public shaming.

Now, our society tends to look at something like this and think it's cruel and vicious and barbaric. Prisons are so much cleaner and more civilized. But what we don't realize is that an eye for an eye is actually a pretty restrained and merciful form of justice.

Middle Eastern culture is notoriously honor-driven, and it has been since ancient times. Which means that when you commit a crime against someone, you not only have to make restitution for what you stole or damaged or injured. You have to make restitution for the honor you have taken from them as well.

Which means if you steal a sheep, you must give back a sheep... and lose a finger. If you assault someone up, you get beaten... and so does your entire family. If you murder someone, you get executed... and your family is shamed for 3 generations. Shame that socially and financially ruins them.

Compared to that, an eye for an eye is actually pretty orderly and merciful. You take back only what has been taken from you. No more, no less. It's rigid. But it's also fair and just.

But what happens when the person you have wronged is not your neighbor, but God himself? What happens when you sin against God in your heart? What happens when you dishonor him with your words? What happens when you neglect him in your worship? If God wants an eye for an eye, if he wants restitution for your crimes, then how do we make payment to God? How much punishment is enough?

That question is at the center of the sacrificial system. The massive Israelite religious system, in which every single sin had an appropriate sacrifice associated with it. So that you knew without a doubt how much punishment God expected from you, and what kind of restitution you had to make. Whether that was in the form of money or grain or doves or sheep or goats or whatever.

Now, does God really care about those things? Does God need your money? Does he benefit from a dove being killed? Does he take pleasure in the sight of a sheep's blood being scattered over his altar? Or of a goat being driven off a cliff?

No. These things are meaningless to him. But they meant everything to the people of Israel. Because that was their payment for their crime against God. That was their assurance that justice had been satisfied. God wasn't sitting up in heaven tallying up their sins anymore. On the day they died, God wouldn't look at them and say, "You did all of this wrong. Now you must suffer for all eternity because of these crimes."

No, instead, in their minds, God would say, "You did this wrong, but you made this sacrifice, so we're good. You committed this sin, but you sacrificed this animal, so I'm wiping it off the books. Don't worry about it."

The sacrificial system was Israel's way of knowing, without a doubt, that they were forgiven. That when the priest entered the holy place of the tabernacle or the temple and offered that sacrifice to God, they no longer had to worry about that sin. It was paid for. God wouldn't judge them for it any longer.

And it had nothing to do with God wanting their money or their grain or their animals. He didn't. God set this whole system up because he's forgiving. And he wants us to know that we're forgiven. He wants us to have assurance of his forgiveness. He doesn't ever want us to doubt his love. He doesn't ever want us to wonder how much punishment is enough for him.

And so with all this in mind, we look now at our Epistle lesson. It's from the book of Hebrews. And it's called the book of Hebrews, because it's about the Hebrews of the Old Testament: the Israelites. And it's written to the Hebrews of the New Testament: Jewish converts to Christianity. People who know the Old Testament inside and out.

But they're still trying to figure out how Jesus fits into all of this. And so the writers say, "Look, the holy places of the Old Testament were copies of the real thing, which is heaven. Just as the sacrifices of the Old Testament were copies of the real thing, which is Jesus."

Those sacrifices back then had to be made over and over again. Because we kept sinning. And we constantly needed that assurance of our forgiveness. And if someone had come up to one of those Israelites and said, "That sheep you're sacrificing? That sacrifice covers every sin you've committed and every sin you ever will commit." They would have said, "Not a chance. There's no way one sheep can cover that many sins. It doesn't make sense. It's not an eye for an eye."

So we kept making sacrifices, over and over and over again. Because it was the only way we could have assurance of our forgiveness. We know, deep down, how much we've sinned. We know, deep down, how much punishment is enough.

And it ain't one sheep. Or ten sheep. Or a hundred sheep. Or a thousand sheep. We have a lifetime of sin. And, given the opportunity, we would have an eternity of sin. Which means the only punishment that's enough to cover it all is an eternity of punishment. It's perfectly fair. Perfectly just. An eye for an eye. A tooth for a tooth. You sin for all eternity. You go to hell for all eternity. Simple.

Except, that's not what happens. Because God is forgiving. And he wants us to have assurance of his forgiveness. He doesn't ever want us to doubt his love. He doesn't ever want us to wonder how much punishment is enough for him.

So he said, "I will send my own son as the sacrifice. No more sheep. No more goats. No more blood on the altar. No more frantically making sacrifices over and over and over again because you don't know how much punishment is enough."

My son is dead on a cross. That's how much punishment is enough. And it's been made. Once for all. It wasn't up to you. He did it on your behalf. He has put away sin forever. There's no reason to make any more sacrifices. You have the assurance of forgiveness that comes from his blood.

And so now we wait for his second coming. Not with doubt or anxiety or fear. Not wondering if we've done enough or said enough or sacrificed enough or been punished enough. Because he's not coming to deal with sin. He already dealt with it. It's been put away. It is finished.

No, now we eagerly wait for his second coming because we know it can only mean our salvation. It can only mean our rescue from this pit of sin and death and despair. It can only mean the beginning of something new. Something wonderful. Something worth eagerly waiting for. It can only mean eternal life with Him. Amen.