

§ 7. Doctrine of Christ

Lecture 20

Objection to the Justification of Penal Substitution

Today we come to the important question of the justice of penal substitution. We've already dealt with an objection to the coherence of penal substitution and saw that that objection was really quite weak. But today is the biggie. This is the fundamental objection that is raised again and again to penal substitution. To punish Christ in our place would be unjust on the part of God. We are raising here the question of what justification there is for God's punishing Christ.

One's justification will be determined by one's overarching theory of justice. We've alluded to this in the past. Let me recap that. Theories of justice can be classified as broadly retributive or consequentialist. Retributive theories of justice hold that punishment is justified because the guilty deserve punishment. By contrast, consequentialist theories of justice hold that punishment is justified because of the extrinsic goods that can be realized through punishment. For example, the deterrence of crime, or the isolation of dangerous persons from society at large, or the reformation of criminals to help them become law abiding citizens. Retributive theories are often said to be retrospective theories of justice. They impose punishment for crimes that have been committed whereas consequentialist theories of justice are prospective, that is to say they aim to prevent future crimes from being committed by punishment through deterrence, isolation of the criminal, or reformation of the criminal. They prospectively try to reduce crime.

With those two broad types of theories of justice in mind, let's look at the alleged injustice of penal substitution. Critics of penal substitution typically assert that God's punishing Christ in our place would be an injustice on God's part. For it is an axiom of retributive justice that it is unjust to punish an innocent person. But Christ was an innocent person. Since God is perfectly just, he cannot therefore have punished Christ. Notice that it would do no good to say that Christ voluntarily or willingly undertook this self-sacrifice on our part because the nobility of his selfless act would not do anything to annul the injustice of punishing an innocent person for crimes that he did not commit.

Just as I was able to formulate the objection of the coherence of penal substitution in a brief argument that made its premises very clear, I tried to do the same thing with this argument against the justice of penal substitution. By the way, if you are dealing with arguments against the Christian faith, it is very helpful I find to sit down and try to put them in the form of logical premises leading to a conclusion. That helps you to understand exactly what is at stake and where the argument might be vulnerable. Of course, when you formulate the argument you always have to try to do it in a sympathetic

way. You don't try to formulate the objector's argument in such a way that it is obviously invalid. You give him the benefit of the doubt and try to formulate the argument as best you can.¹ It seems to me that this is the way the argument against the justice of penal substitution goes.

1. God is perfectly just.
2. If God is perfectly just, he cannot punish an innocent person.
3. Therefore, God cannot punish an innocent person.
4. Christ was an innocent person.
5. Therefore God cannot punish Christ.
6. If God cannot punish Christ then penal substitution is false.

Once again we have a chain of inferences that would show that if God is perfectly just then penal substitution is false. This seems to me to be a formulation of the argument. God is perfectly just. If God is perfectly just, he cannot punish an innocent person. Therefore God cannot punish an innocent person. Christ was an innocent person. Therefore God cannot punish Christ. If God cannot punish Christ then penal substitution is false.

As we saw with the objection to the coherence of penal substitution, a penal substitution theorist who does not believe that God punished Christ would be unfazed by this argument because he would disagree that if God cannot punish Christ penal substitution is false. Remember we saw that some defenders of penal substitution maintain that God did not, in fact, punish Christ. Rather, he inflicted Christ with the suffering which was our just desert and so would have been our punishment had it been inflicted on us instead. God did not punish Christ, but he inflicted Christ with the suffering that would have been our punishment if we had borne it instead. These theorists might actually welcome an argument like this in favor of their view that penal substitution is true but God did not punish Christ. So like the last argument, if you hold to a theory of penal substitution that denies that God punished Christ, you will be completely unfazed by this objection to penal substitution.

But suppose that we think with I would say the majority of penal substitution theorists that God did in fact punish Christ in our place. Suppose you agree to that. Then that raises the question of premises (1) and (2). What does it mean to say that God is perfectly just, and is it true that if God is perfectly just he cannot punish an innocent person? One very quick and easy way to dispense with this argument would be to adopt a consequentialist theory of justice. It is common coin among legal theorists that a

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consequentialist theory of justice could lead to justifying the punishment of the innocent. For example, it might be justified to punish an innocent person because of the great deterrence value that would have in preventing future crime. In fact, one of the main criticisms of consequentialist theories of justice is that they can justify the punishment of the innocent. So if you are a penal substitution theorist who is a consequentialist, it would be very easy to provide consequentialist justification for God's punishing Christ, namely, doing so would save the entire human race from destruction! You can't think of a much better consequence than that. So if you are a consequentialist you can affirm that God is perfectly just but it would not follow from his perfect justice that he could not punish an innocent person.

But as I've said in previous classes, it seems that consequentialism is ill-suited to be a basis for divine punishment, biblically-speaking, because God's judgment is described in the Bible as ultimately eschatological.² That is to say, it is the judgment that takes place on the final day of judgment at the end of human history. The Bible says the ungodly are "storing up wrath" for themselves on God's final day of judgment (Romans 2:5). Punishment imposed at that point could seem to serve no other purpose than retribution. It is too late to have any beneficial consequences by that point.

I suppose the Christian consequentialist could say that there is a consequentialist justification on the judgment day, namely, by isolating the wicked in hell you prevent them from infiltrating or infecting the community of the redeemed in the same way that hardened criminals are isolated in prison to prevent them from infecting society at large. But I don't think that is a very good justification on consequentialism because God could achieve that end of protecting the redeemed simply by annihilating the damned. The consequentialist would need to find some further consequentialist reason for keeping the damned in existence and continuing to punish them apart from retribution. So I don't think consequentialism is a theory of justice that is well suited to the biblical conception of God and his justice.

In any case, the Bible is very explicit in affirming that the wicked deserve punishment. And that is the heart of a retributive theory of justice – punishment is justified because the wicked deserve to be punished. Romans 1:32 says, "those who do such things deserve to die." That is a retributive theory of justice. Or Hebrews 10:29 says, "how much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by the man who has spurned the Son of God?" There the author of Hebrews says that someone who has spurned Christ deserves punishment.

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So it seems to me that retributive justice must be in large measure the justification for divine punishment. God's justice must be in some very significant measure retributive in nature.

During the first half of the twentieth century, under the influence of psychologists and social scientists, retributive theories of justice were widely frowned upon in favor of consequentialist theories of justice. Fortunately, however, there has been over the last half-century a renaissance of theories of retributive justice among legal theorists, and this has been accompanied by a drastic waning of consequentialist theories of justice. So we don't need to be distracted in our lesson with the need to try to justify a retributive theory of justice. The person who holds to a biblical retributive theory of justice is right in line with mainstream legal theory of justice today in thinking of justice as retributive. This change in the legal community is due in no small part to the unwelcome implication of consequentialism that there are circumstances under which it is just to punish the innocent. It is precisely because of that that consequentialism has been rejected. But the conviction that the innocent ought not to be punished is what lies behind the claim that penal substitution would be unjust on God's part. So what is given with one hand is taken back with the other. On the one hand, legal theory has vindicated a retributive theory of justice in line with biblical thinking about God's justice (a very welcomed development). But on the other hand, it is precisely retributive justice that holds that the innocent ought not to be punished and hence for the retributivist this objection to penal substitution arises in spades.³

START DISCUSSION

Student: I think the key is that God does not uphold justice with punishment, but he infused righteousness to the wicked, and the penal substitution is Christ's willingness to go that route instead of dealing with punishment.

Dr. Craig: Let me interrupt here. Do you agree that the New Testament teaches the doctrine of hell – that those who reject God's grace and refuse his righteousness will be punished in hell?

Student: I do agree, but I think that is the nature of God's law being violated. Then there will be natural or divine consequences of that.

Dr. Craig: All right. You are actually hitting a very subtle point here that is worth bringing to the surface. Is death and separation from God simply the consequence of sin or is it the punishment for sin? Some people would want to get around saying that God punishes the wicked by just saying, *No, their abandonment by God or their spiritual separation from God is just a consequence of sin, but it is not really a punishment for sin.* As I read the New Testament, it is inadequate to say that death and hell are merely

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consequences of sin. These are punishments, and they are called punishment in the New Testament as you heard from the book of Hebrews: “how much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by the man who has spurned the Son of God?” So it seems to me that the New Testament clearly affirms that the harsh treatment that befalls the wicked at God’s hands is his punishment of them for their sins. Moreover, this is retributive punishment. They deserved this as wicked person, and therefore God is just in imposing this harsh treatment on them.

Student: I think both. Both stands because to me death is when one rejects life. Then they enter into death by their own choice because they reject life.

Dr. Craig: I am happy with that. I think we can say this doesn’t need to be an either-or. These are both consequences of sin, and they are also punishments for sin. I don’t have any problem with saying this is a both-and.

Student: In a similar manner, both retributive and consequential could be true, too.

Dr. Craig: Yes, you are right about that. This may not need to be an either-or choice either. You could have theories of justice that blend consequentialist and retributivist considerations. That is why I couched my words with some caution. I said that God’s justice must be in some significant measure retributive. That seems to me to be required by the New Testament.

Student: To that last point, to put them both together, Hebrews 2:9 says, “Christ tasted death for every person.” Separation is the ultimate penalty and consequence of sin. Christ suffered what it was like to be separated from God for all time in a moment of time for everyone. That is why he needed to be God so he could do it for everybody in a moment of time for all time. But yet the Son will never be permanently separated from the Father. So he is uniquely positioned to do what he did.

Dr. Craig: Yes. I would agree with that. That is a point that you remember Anselm made, and I think that is absolutely correct.

Student: Jesus, when he was referring to Judas, said it would be better for that one if he had never been born.⁴ That indicates something more than just eternal separation as a natural consequence. Something else was coming down that was going to really impact him in a bad way. He doesn’t go any further.

Dr. Craig: Well, I don’t want to get off on a tangent here, but if you think about what it really means to be separated from God – from all that is good and lovely – and to be left with your own crabbed, selfish, sinful heart forever, that is pretty torturous. So I wouldn’t minimize the anguish and horror of separate from God.

Student: Could you restate the verse references from the New Testament in regard to the retributive theory?

Dr. Craig: The first one was Romans 1:32 where Paul, after listing this catalog of human sins, says, “Those who do such things deserve to die.” That is Romans 1:32. The Hebrews passage was Hebrews 10:29 where he is referring specifically to people who reject Christ.

END DISCUSSION

How might we respond to this argument?

First, an assessment of this objection requires that we contextualize it within a theory about the grounding of objective moral values and duties. Who, after all, determines what is just and unjust? We can all agree that God is perfectly just, but who determines what is just or unjust? The proponents of penal substitution that we’ve surveyed, like St. Anselm, were all proponents of some sort of Divine Command Theory of ethics, according to which moral duties are determined by God’s commands. There is no external law hanging over God to which he has to conform. Since God does not issue commands to himself as to what he has to do, it would follow that he literally has no moral duties to perform. He can act in any way he wants as long as it is consistent with his own nature. He does not have the moral duties that we have and so he will have unique prerogatives that we human beings do not share. For example, giving and taking human life as he wills. It would be unjust if someone were to pull a gun out of his briefcase and kill me, but if God wants to strike me dead right now that is his prerogative. All life is his and he gives and takes it as he chooses. He has no duty to prolong our lives one second further. In many cases God may act in accordance with duty. He may go along with what we do out of duty, but he doesn’t act from duty because he doesn’t have any moral duties. He can make exceptions to the rule if he wants to. This is the lesson of the astonishing story of God’s command to Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac on the altar as a sacrificial offering to God. That story is found in Genesis 22:1-19. God commands Abraham to do an act which, in the absence of a divine command, would have been murder. It would have been a horrible sin if Abraham had, on his own initiative, taken his son Isaac and tried to offer him as a sacrificial offering to God. But given a divine command, it now becomes Abraham’s duty to do this. So God has the ability to command an act which, in the absence of a divine command, would have been sin like murder. I think this shows how radical God’s prerogatives are. When we say it is unjust of God to do this and that, who are you to say that? It is God himself who determines what is just and unjust.⁵

Now if that sort of theory of ethics is coherent, as I’ve argued that it is when we looked at the goodness of God and we talked about moral values and duties, where are these

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grounded, where do objective moral values and duties come from – look at that section of the Defenders class where I defended this view. If this theory is coherent then this present objection to penal substitution has difficulty even getting off of the ground. As Hugo Grotius observed, even if God has established a human system of justice which forbids the punishment of the innocent and hence substitutionary punishment, he himself isn't so forbidden. He can forbid human beings to punish the innocent or to have substitutes, but he is not forbidden from doing that. In the book of Exodus you may remember the story of God's anger burning against the people of Israel for their idolatry and Moses says, *Lord, take my life in place of these people. Kill me instead of punishing these people to make atonement for their sin.* The word "atonement" is actually used. Moses is offering substitutionary atonement to the Lord. And God refuses Moses' offer. He says, *No, I will require this sin from their own hand at some future time. I will punish them for what they've done.* He refuses Moses' offer to be a substitutionary atonement. In the same way, he refused Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac as an offering to him. He commanded it, but then remember he stopped Abraham before it could be carried out. So God has refused to allow human beings to punish the innocent, to do substitutionary punishment. But if it is God's will to take on human nature himself in the person of Jesus of Nazareth and to give his own life as a sacrificial offering for sin, who is to forbid him? Who forbids God from doing this? He is free to do so as long as it is consistent with his own nature. And what could be more consistent with God's gracious nature than that he should condescend to take on our frail and fallen humanity and give his own life to pay the penalty which his own justice had exacted? This self-giving sacrifice of Christ I think exalts the nature of God by displaying his holy love – his holiness, his justice, as well as his love and mercy.

START DISCUSSION

Student: In essence, what I was thinking, too, when you put this on the board and you put down "God cannot punish an innocent person" my thought was "why not if he chooses?" In Job 1:21 he said, *The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. Praise be the name of the Lord.* I guess that is just your point – whatever he determines is appropriate for his good end is appropriate whether it is of human understanding or not. I think that is important. When bad things happen to good people, immediately one says that is just not just. Why would God do this? Take away the life of a child or whatever. It is something that in our own human understanding, we cannot, I think, fully grasp. Then it has to go on faith because what God sees is just and right and appropriate. Maybe we are not even able to understand that.

Dr. Craig: Just so that no one draws the wrong inference from what you said, in the book of Job, Job's sufferings are not presented as punishments from God. That is what Job's friends think! That Job has committed some sin and therefore he is being punished by God. You aren't saying that, and we shouldn't misunderstand your point that the

sovereign God is himself the source of moral duties and hence determines what is just or unjust.⁶ In which case this objection can't even get started.

Student: It seems that following a pure Divine Command Theory of ethics, if our moral duties are entirely founded on God's moral commands then what is the need for Christ's sacrifice in the first place? Could he just have made the commands less serious or why couldn't he just forgive us if the only problem was his original command? Does that make sense?

Dr. Craig: Yes, I think so. We will say more about that in the future. You are saying that if God determines that it is just to pardon everyone without requiring Christ's death then he could have chosen to do that as well. It might surprise you that a good number of prominent Christian theologians have held that. For example, this is Thomas Aquinas' view as well as the view of most of the church fathers. They would say, yes, God could have simply chosen to pardon our sins but he chose to do it through Christ because he had good reasons for doing it that way. It was more suitable. Hugo Grotius is an example of a penal substitution theorist who also thought that it wasn't necessary to satisfy divine justice in order for God to pardon our sins. But he says God chose to do it that way to give us a stark example of his hatred of sin, of how horrid and detestable it is, as well as his tremendous love in embracing this sacrificial suffering, this incomprehensible suffering, on our behalf in order to save us. So Grotius would say although God could have simply pardoned us he chose to do it this way because of the great example of God's holiness and love that the passion of Christ displays.

Student: This is the theory that I would have subscribed to as well, but I guess now that I am thinking about it I sort of have realized that it seems to conflict with the whole . . . talking about the objective standards objectively being in God and that he has the highest moral standards. And then you got the Euthyphro Dilemma going on here and that is does God will something to be just or is there an objective justice that is in him that God could potentially basically overturn his own objective justice that is in him? Is it objectively just in God to say God can't punish the innocent in him, then he can just overturn it. That seems to be the problem for me with the Divine Command Theory.

Dr. Craig: OK, I think I understand what you are saying. You have to understand the way philosophers work. The Germans would call this a kind of give and take. I am saying this is a start here – a Divine Command Theory of justice. But what you and the other questioner here seemed to suggest is that this seems to imply a kind of voluntarism on God's part. He could have decreed that hatred be good and therefore it would be our moral duty to hate one another and try to do each other wrong and harm. That seems wrong. That was why I said God has the ability to command anything so long as it is

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consistent with his own nature – his own loving, good nature. Suppose one who is pressing this objection wants to push it forward in the face of a Divine Command Theory, what might he say? I think what he might say is that retributive justice is part of God’s nature. Therefore it is impossible that God act contrary to the principles of retributive justice. That pushes the argument now forward a notch. God is free to command whatever he wants so long as it is consistent with his own nature, but suppose one says that retributive justice is essential to God’s nature. That is what I think many orthodox Christians believe and many penal substitution theorists believe. In that case the objection then surfaces again. God cannot act contrary to the principles of retributive justice because that would be acting contrary to his own nature.⁷ So you are right back again to premise (2) – if God is perfectly just then he cannot punish an innocent person because that would be contrary to his nature to the principles of retributive justice.

Student: Can you explain when David sinned God punished the people? He gave David choices, and then he decided to punish the people for David’s sin.

Dr. Craig: Can you give me more specifics?

Student: I’ll get you a reference next time. I can’t find it.

Dr. Craig: OK. There certainly are some stories in the Old Testament that make one squeamish with respect to retributive justice where the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children and so forth. One is inclined to be thinking in cases like that perhaps of the consequences of sin rather than punishment for sin. Remember the distinction you made between consequences and punishment? Certainly the father’s sins can have terrible consequences that might be visited upon the children.

Student: She is talking about David took the census, and then God gave him three options of punishment. He said, *Take it out on the people*, and 35,000 people were killed in his army. That is the example she is talking about.

Dr. Craig: OK. That would be one of these cases that would make you feel somewhat squeamish but would make it more difficult for the objection of penal substitution to go through biblically at least. I think probably what one might say in that case would be that these people punished are themselves sinners and deserve it. So it is not as though God was punishing innocent people for what David did. These were themselves also sinful people also deserving of punishment and so they received it now in this lifetime rather than simply waiting until the end of the age.

END DISCUSSION

We need to wrap it up at this point now. What we will do when we come back next Sunday is I will then examine more closely the nature of retributive justice and ask what

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does it mean to say that retributive justice is essential to God's very nature? I think we'll see that this is a much more nuanced question than what the opponent to penal substitution thinks it is.⁸