

Series: 7 Bowls with 7 Plagues (a study in Revelation 15-16)

Sermon Text: 16:4-6 Divine Retribution

(Use **app** to get

lesson/slides, ask questions)

While studying the judgment plagues, we stumbled over *Revelation 16:4-7* where John *heard the angel in charge of the waters* say, *“Just are you, O Holy One, who is and who was, for you brought these judgments. For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink. It is what they deserve!”* Then voices from the altar declared, *“Yes, Lord God the Almighty, true and just are your judgments!”* This “deserved repayment for wrongs” forces us to grapple with our thoughts about divine retribution (how God repays or rewards human activities). Professor Michael Gorman (p. 158) said: *“It is tempting to read the visions of judgment and (symbolic) destruction as the activity of an angry God and/or the ranting of an angry people; many have been unable to resist the temptation. But in the end, we have argued, God is portrayed in Revelation, not as uncontrollably angry, but as (inevitably) just.”* We could say God’s judgments are surgical, in that they carefully extract what ruins creation for the health of the whole. Today, then, we’ll unpack this encouraging...

BIG IDEA: God’s vengeance is all about setting the world right.

Revelation 16 declares something we must all wrestle with...**God’s rulings are always true** (proper, correct, consistent with truth), **just** (honorable, equitable, morally right), **and deserved** (the reward befits the cosmic crime). I wonder, *“Do you believe this, do you have questions about it, or both?”* A few weeks ago, I ended our lesson on *16:1-7* by saying, *“God’s judgments, whether allowed or sent, are never technically vindictive or cruel.”* Some question that because God said stuff like: *“Vengeance is mine, and recompense, I will repay!”* However, The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia (p. 154) tells us *“The Hebrew and Greek words for ‘vengeance’ generally refer to a legitimate exercise of sovereignty that simultaneously overpowers the guilty offender (punishment) and rescues the innocent victim (mercy). The Hebrew roots ysr, ‘reprimand,’ and ykh, ‘rebuke,’ refer to retributive acts that are simultaneously punitive and salvific (saving).”* Apparently then, God’s vengeance and retribution aim to **set the world right** which

He implied in texts like Deuteronomy 32:35-36 NIV: *“It is mine to avenge; I will repay. In due time... their doom rushes upon them. The LORD will vindicate his people and have compassion on his servants...”* Divine retribution is simply how God rewards or repays human activities based on how things are supposed to function. Galatians 6:7-9 says, *“...whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.”* According to Professor Michael Gorman (p. 157), *“If God is true in the biblical sense of the word, (He) will act appropriately by executing the justice His holiness requires. A permanent state of injustice would mean God is neither true nor just, and in the narrative world of Scripture as a whole, that simply cannot be.”*

Now, “What does this mean for us as recipients of God's just retribution?” Since we've been created in God's image, we naturally yearn for things to be set right even as our sin nature skews what we view as fair or proportionate. For this reason, God established what's known as the *“Law of Retaliation”* in Deuteronomy 19:21, *“...life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.”* Some use this as a death penalty verse, but as you'll see in our notes, it isn't the best support for that idea because this law was given to keep us from going too far (i.e., no more than an eye for an eye). Final decisions are also left to judges, not individuals. Exodus 21:22 NIV says, *“If people are fighting and hit a pregnant woman and she gives birth prematurely but there is no serious injury, the offender must be fined whatever the woman's husband demands and the court allows.”* While courts may add a layer of objectivity, they don't guarantee perfect outcomes. For that reason, the prophets promised a final *“Day of the LORD”* when the **true and just judgments of the Lord God Almighty** will ultimately set the world right (cf. Isaiah 66:6; Jeremiah. 5:9, 29; 9:9; 46:10).

Having examined what it means to be recipients of just retribution, now let's ask: “In what ways are we to imitate God's justice?” Say for instance someone harms you, a drunk driver kills your loved one, or civilians are denied food and water in a time of war. Such situations ignite desires for vengeance and retribution yet consider

how Jesus viewed the law of retaliation in [Matthew 5](#): “*You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, 'Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.' ... 'You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so you may be children of your Father in heaven.*” In Christ’s view, biblical texts inform to transform! By reflecting God’s nature, character and goals, they invite us to be like Him with the Spirit’s help. Exodus 34:6-7 is a great example: “...*the LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.*” We know [this isn’t a promise to punish our grandkids](#) when we sin because Deuteronomy 24:16 says, “*Fathers shall not be put to death because of their children, nor shall children be put to death because of their fathers. Each one shall be put to death for his own sin.*” (cf. Ezekiel 18). What’s intriguing about Exodus 34 is how it was said after [the golden calf incident](#) where the nation of Israel had sinned against God. It contrasts how national idolatry can impact a few generations, but how God’s mercy can effectively reach more! He will continue to visit, [not the “sin” \(missing the mark\) but their “iniquity” \(sin nature\)](#) in pursuit of their redemption. In Christ’s way of seeing things, God’s character invites us to partner with God in this pursuit like Jesus does.

So, “What’s the benefit of us extending mercy and blessing?” Romans 12:17-21 says, “*Repay no one evil for evil but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’ To the contrary, ‘If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good.*” This quote from Proverbs 25 also draws from the Isaiah 6 vision where “*burning coals from the altar*” brought awareness, remorse, and repentance. The

point is that while it's fine to long for the Day of Divine Retribution [like the altar saints in Revelation](#), obedient faith permits us to see God's goodness doing what laws can't--[leading people to awareness, remorse, and repentance](#) (cf. Romans 2:4). So, instead of playing victim or letting the evil of others control us, everyone benefits when we let grace empower us to take responsibility and root out desires for revenge by "*leaving that up to the wrath of*" the only perfect judge.

In closing, the word "*wrath*" reminds us of [2 ways God deals with sin](#). 1) Revelation says unrepentant people who curse God will drink the cup of God's wrath (i.e., pay for their sins). 2) God's gospel says the repentant can be credited with Jesus drinking the cup for us on the cross! Either way, the crimes are paid for! [This divine retributive justice is defended](#) in Romans 3:25-26 NLT: "*For God presented Jesus as the sacrifice for sin...to show that He was being fair when he held back and did not punish those who sinned in times past, for he was looking ahead and including them in what he would do in this present time. God did this to demonstrate his righteousness, for he himself is fair and just, and he declares sinners to be right in his sight when they believe in Jesus.*" Ponder all this with God's people, and remember, next steps need not be taken alone--let Christ's church be your supportive family!

Takeaways to discuss with your people (in addition to the underlined questions above!):

1. What injustices would you like God to correct and resolve? How are you encouraged by knowing that divine vengeance plays a part in restoring creation to God's original design?
2. Psalm 94 reveals why some would praise divine retribution: "*O LORD, God of vengeance, O God of vengeance, shine forth! Rise up, O judge of the earth; repay to the proud what they deserve! O LORD, how long shall the wicked, how long shall the wicked exult? They pour out their arrogant words; all the evildoers boast. They crush your people, O LORD, and afflict your heritage. They kill the widow and the sojourner and murder the fatherless; and they say, 'The LORD does not see; the God of Jacob does not perceive.'*" Share your thoughts about this passage, whether it reflects your thoughts, and why.
3. Take a moment to read Romans 12:17-21 or even the whole chapter. In what ways is Paul relying on the teachings of Jesus in Matthew 5? Why might God want us to adopt an ethic of non-retaliation, and what does Romans 12:18 imply about the potential limit of this? In what ways do 12:20-21 suggest that non-retaliation is only the beginning of our duty towards persecutors?

4. How do our responses to divine judgment reveal our assessment of God? How does understanding the 2 ways God deals with sin (that crimes are paid for through our death or through Christ's death) help us experience peace and freedom? How can it help us become less vengeful or more merciful and forgiving without feeling like we're taking sin lightly?
5. In John 14:9 Jesus said, "*Whoever has seen me has seen the Father*" thereby presenting Himself as a mirror image of the Old Testament God. This can be confusing when trying to reconcile Old Testament laws of retribution (Lev. 24:17–21; Dt. 19:21) with New Testament instances of mercy and forgiveness (cf. Romans 3:25). Some attempt to resolve this by suggesting that some of God's attributes supersede others, saying for instance that "*a loving God must pardon everyone in the end.*" Others refuse to resolve it, wanting nothing to do with a divine being they perceive as petty, wrathful, and condemning. I wonder, "*Where are you on that scale, and why?*" Scripture invites us to embrace the tension of the one true God who justly delivers divine retribution (repayment for wrong) and amazing grace (unearned pardon). Joy is found, not by resolving this tension but by learning to live in it.
6. How might we reconcile the governmental responsibilities in Romans 13 with the individual duties laid out in Romans 12? In what ways are both accountable to God, and how should believers respond when governments don't carry out their divine obligations righteously? How might 1 Peter 2:13-17 help us?
7. Professor G. A. Herion (p. 155) wrote: "God's people, while working and praying for the welfare of their community (Jer. 29:7), must not appeal to the civil authority for personal restitution when unlawfully wronged. Following Christ's example, they are to suffer the wrong (Mt. 5:38–42; 1 Cor. 6:1–8). Nevertheless, God works beneath the human manipulation of civil power, for without the coercive power of law restraining the wicked, creation would turn into chaos." What do you think about this?
8. When are you most tempted to want revenge? How does Revelation 15-16 enable us to respond differently?

Quotes related to this passage:

- **Justice:** "The call to justice has always been central to God's heart. Justice is not separate from faith—it is an expression of it. To follow Jesus is to care about what He cares about, to love those He loves, and to take action on behalf of those who cannot fight for themselves. This isn't optional. It's what it means to be a child of God. When we seek justice, we reflect the heart of our Father, who is always near to the brokenhearted, always championing the cause of the vulnerable, and always working through His people to bring justice to the world." (Author unknown)
- **Views of God's wrath:** "People nowadays seem to have one of two basic perspectives about the 'wrath' of God. They either think of it as a punitive, vindictive, retribution on the part of God, or they dismiss it as a vestige of the cruel and darker perspectives of a less enlightened age. The first results in a God who is mean, authoritarian, even cruel; a God who is all too often

incarnate in believers who are judgmental, critical, vindictive, punitive, retributive. The second results in a God who overlooks sin, who is not really concerned with the brokenness of people but who ‘blesses’ human bondages as ‘normal’ though ‘variant’ lifestyles. Such a God is also incarnate in believers for whom the primary virtue is ‘tolerance’ and whose values are but one set of relativities in a pluralistic world. It is readily obvious that such extremes have lost the creative tension of the paradox of reality.” (Mulholland, 545-546)

- **3rd and 4th generations:** “As for the punishment, the fact that children might suffer for their parents’ actions (which is what v. 5 implies; see also 34:7) is contrary to explicit statements made elsewhere in the Old Testament (e.g., Deut. 24:16; Ezek. 18:4). The former reads, ‘Fathers shall not be put to death for their children, nor children put to death for their fathers; each is to die for his own sin.’ Sarna suggests, with typical honesty, that ‘the intensification of the problem of evil led to revision of this view,’ an approach even made explicit in the Talmud. In other words, the ideal of 20:5 could not be carried through because Israel became too sinful. No one would be left. As unsatisfying as this solution seems to me, I am hard pressed to think of a better one. I do not want to argue that God doesn’t really mean what he says here. In fact, the threat of punishment may be more severe than a surface reading of verse 5 lets on. ‘Third and fourth generation’ need not be taken literally. For example, the refrain in Amos 1–2 (‘for three sins ... even for four’) is not to be understood as literally only ‘three or four’ sins. It means simply for all their many sins. Moreover, the blessing of Exodus 20:6 going to ‘thousands of generations’ likewise means more than just literally thousands, but a lot, perhaps even never-ending. In view of this, it seems that the second commandment is teaching that both obedience and disobedience have far-reaching implications for Israel’s life as God’s covenant people. If they disobey, the effects will be felt for a long, long time.” Peter Enns, Exodus, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 415–416.
- **Burning coals:** “In responding to our enemies in this way, the text from Proverbs goes on to say, we will ‘heap burning coals on his head.’ Most of us are familiar with this language. It has passed into Christian parlance as a way of encouraging believers to do good to those who are nasty to us. What is usually implied is that our responding to evil with good will cause people to become ashamed of their actions and perhaps seek reconciliation with the Lord. Whether this idea of contrition is what is communicated by the imagery in Proverbs is less certain. ‘Coals’ and ‘fire’ in the Old Testament usually connote divine judgment. Thus, Proverbs (and Paul) may be saying that kindness toward enemies will result in further judgment on them from the Lord. But this interpretation does not fit the context. With almost all modern commentators, then, we think the popular Christian interpretation of the clause is probably right: Paul urges us to show kindness to our enemies with the hope that they will become ashamed of their actions and seek the underlying reason why we can respond with such love.” Douglas J. Moo,

Romans, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000), 413.

- **Christ our substitute:** “What enables us to bless those who persecute us, to do good to our enemies, to overcome evil with good? It is the confidence that God is in control. Justice will be done for every sin against us. If the perpetrator becomes a Christian, then justice will have been done at the cross when the punishment for the sin they have committed against us fell on Christ. And if the person does not become a Christian, then justice will be done at the last day. The judgment that is coming on those who do not repent has already come for the repentant on Jesus in our place. Jesus himself experienced the wrath of God—instead of us. He was forsaken by God, taking our judgment in our place. If you belong to Jesus, then all God’s wrath that was being stored up against you was poured out on his own Son. And, just as he bore your judgment, so his righteousness is counted as yours if you are in him. We are clothed with his merits. Through faith we are united to Christ so that all that belongs to him now belongs to us.” (Chester, 119-123)
- **Non-retaliation:** “The wholesale renunciation of violence on the part of Christians can be persuasively argued. But is it finally a persuasive biblical position? I am not sure. As we will see in Romans 13:4, Paul clearly recognizes the right of the state to punish wrongdoers. To argue that this job must be left to non-Christians comes perilously close to a kind of ‘two-kingdom’ ethic in which what is immoral for Christians is allowed to non-Christians. If the state is God’s instrument to accomplish his purposes among them the punishment of wrongdoers, how can Christians be wrong to participate in that service? An even greater problem for the pacifist view is the Old Testament, where God commands his people to use violence against his enemies. Hays, for instance, admits that the Old Testament legitimizes violence for God’s people on some occasions, but that the New Testament witness is normative. But any view that plays one Testament off against the other is suspect. When the entire biblical witness is considered, it seems that Christians are tacitly allowed to use violence in the service of the state. But is violence allowed to the Christian in everyday personal relationships? Am I justified in defending myself or others if unjustly attacked? Here the biblical evidence is less clear. Both Jesus in Matthew 5 and Paul in Romans 12 seem to be speaking about such personal relationships, and they do not appear to allow exceptions. In any case, what they both seem clearly to prohibit is vengeance, that is, taking revenge by exacting justice from those who have done wrong to us. Paul, at least, does not seem to be speaking directly to the matter of violence in defense of the innocent. Jesus seems to suggest a much broader principle: ‘Do not resist an evil person’ (Matt. 5:39). Furthermore, both Jesus and Paul enjoin believers, positively, to bless people who do wrong to us, to seek peace with everyone, and to respond to evil with good. Whether defense of the innocent in our personal lives is justified biblically is unclear. But what is clear is that believers are to cultivate an attitude of love that puts the focus on the good of the other person and not on the defense of our own rights, dignity, or even, perhaps, our very lives. Lived out consistently, the

Christian community can become a genuine counterculture that serves as a witness to a world increasingly caught up in the spiral of violence. Americans demand the right to carry guns and use them because other people are. Poverty-stricken nations spend billions of dollars on weapons so that they can keep up with their neighbors. Our children are taught to defend themselves, to ‘fight for their rights,’ and so on. Jesus suggests a better way. While it would be utopian for us to think we can transform society by our attitudes, what the church is ultimately called to do is to be a witness. Douglas J. Moo, Romans, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000), 418–419.

- **Cries from the altar:** “The altar confirms God’s justice (16:7), undoubtedly because it harbors the prayers of the saints (either the altar of sacrifice [6:9] or the altar of incense [8:3, 5]); hence it participates in the judgment (9:13; 14:18). It echoes Moses’ song in 15:3: God is powerful enough (‘Lord God Almighty’) to execute his ‘true and just’ judgments.” (Keener, 394)
- **Revelation 14’s harvest metaphor:** “This puts our understanding of both salvation and judgment in a new frame of reference. Salvation is not merely a juridical transaction that removes a person from the list of those condemned and guarantees their being ‘harvested’ into heaven when they die. Salvation is rather a process of maturation in one’s relationship with God and others through which one is increasingly re-formed in the image of God and whose life progressively manifests Christlikeness in one’s actions. Conversely, judgment is not merely a judicial fiat arbitrarily condemning one to punishment. Judgment is the consequence of a process of maturation in one’s relationship with God and others through which one is increasingly self-centered, ever more fully usurping the role of God in his or her life, and whose self-centered actions progressively treat others as objects to be used or abused for the fulfillment of one’s own purposes. In both salvation and judgment, the outcome is simply the final acknowledgment of the result of a long journey in a constant direction.” (Mulholland, 541)

Considerations for discussion leaders:

1. Keep circling back to the big idea and main points of the passage to stay on track.
2. Keep the group small for deeper sharing. Single underlined sentences are for discussion, while key points are double underlined.
3. Keep the discussion around 30 mins. Once you hit the “sweet spot”, spend your time there.
4. Keep these simple questions in your back pocket: What is God teaching you? What are you going to do about it? How will it help you love & serve others?

Other Articles/Songs/Videos: Please ask us for help obtaining other resources.

- [5 Strategies for Reading Revelation](#) from the Bible Project (the first 17 minutes is GOLD!)
- [Heaven and Earth Theme](#) from the Bible Project
- [Other super helpful Revelation summaries](#) from the Bible Project

- [How Revelation mimics ancient Olympic games](#) by Marty Solomon

Bibliography (Note: Our use of these materials does not imply full agreement with them)

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