

The “Marginalizing of God” in the “Gospel”

Introduction

Six months ago, I preached a message on something called “Critical Theory.” This morning, we’re going to see what happens when Critical Theory is adopted by the “church” and applied to the Gospel. We want to see what “the Gospel according to Critical Theory” is so that we might better know how to guard and love the true Gospel that is powerful to save. What we’re going to do now is try to respond biblically to a video on “Justice” produced by the “Bible Project.”

“If you were a praying mantis it would be socially acceptable to devour your mate. If you’re a honey badger you have no regard for other animals. You don’t care. If you’re a Panda with twins, it’s normal to abandon one to take care of the other. But if humans do any of these things, we would call it wrong, unfair, or unjust. Why is that? Why do humans care so much about justice? The Bible has a fascinating response to that question. On page one, humans are set apart from all other creatures as the image of God. God’s representatives who rule the world by His definition of good and evil.”

What I’m about to say may seem at first like a subtle point, but as we’ll see, it’s essential. Notice how the video speaks of man as God’s representatives who were to rule the world by “His definition” of good and evil. In other videos we’re told that “God is holy *because* He’s morally perfect” (emphasis mine; video on “Holy”). “He *defines* what is good and not good” and “God’s *definition* of good [versus evil]” is “[using our] authority for the *benefit* of others” (video on “God”). We have this sense of God “deciding” what is good and evil and telling us what is good and evil, but that ultimately this definition of good and evil is something outside of God—something somehow independent of Him, to which He Himself conforms. The assumption is that God’s definition is the only “right” definition, but there’s a serious failure here to affirm that God Himself *is* the definition of what is “good” and that, therefore, all that he wills is good simply because *He* has willed/commanded it. So the video does not say that man was to rule the world “according to God’s will/command” in the most ultimate sense of that word, but “according to God’s *definition* of good and evil.”

It’s in this light that we’re given more freedom to make God according to our own image. Instead of “good” being whatever God wills/commands (revealed will), “good” is a standard to which God himself perfectly “conforms” and so now we’re free, as it were, to put God in a “straight-jacket” of His—or our—own making. Since “good” is not “whatever God wills,” we are free—and even required—to reinterpret Scripture according to that definition of good and evil to which God conforms. We are free—and even required—to eliminate portions of Scripture that don’t faithfully reflect this “definition” of good and evil.

- 1 Samuel 15:1–3 — Thus says the LORD of hosts, “I have noted what Amalek did to Israel in opposing them on the way when they came up out of Egypt. Now go and strike Amalek and devote to destruction all that they have. Do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.”

If Saul had obeyed the Lord, should we call what he did, “good”? Yes, we should. Not because killing children and infants is in and of itself “good,” but because obedience to the will of God is good, and because the “end” or the “goal” of this killing was also “good.”

- Leviticus 18:4–5 — You shall follow my rules and keep my statutes and walk in them. **I am the LORD your God.** You shall therefore keep my statutes and my rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them: **I am the LORD.**

The first step in this video to a Gospel powerless to save is a subtle distinguishing between “God,” on the one hand, and God’s definition of good and evil on the other hand. In this way, we are free—and even required—to define God according to an independent definition of good and evil that we believe is most worthy and fitting of Him. This is in contrast with defining good and evil simply according to what God has willed/commanded – which, in turn, is always in accordance with what He has revealed of His nature (merciful, just, wise, etc.), *though we may not know how.*

- Romans 11:34 — Who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?
- Job 36:23 — Who has prescribed for him his way, or who can say, “You have done wrong”?

Brothers and sisters, if we are to truly understand the Gospel we must first understand the true supremacy of God – a God who does not conform to any “definition” of “good” that’s in any way independent of Himself. Which leads to the next step taken in this video to a Gospel powerless to save.

“This identity [of man as God’s image] is the bedrock of the Bible’s view of justice. All humans are equal before God and have the right to be treated with dignity and fairness no matter who you are.”

There is a wonderful truth in these words – which is what makes the lie that’s mixed in with them so dangerous. It’s true that all humans are equal before God and should be treated with dignity and “fairness” no matter who they are (if we mean by fairness, “without partiality”; Lev. 19:15). It is not true that the bedrock of the Bible’s view of justice is “my rights.” Over and over, we’re being told today that as individualistic, western Christians we ought not to be clinging to our *perceived* “rights.” And yet we’re also being told that it’s my *inherent* “**rights**” as the image of God that define what biblical “justice” is. What’s the problem with this teaching? And how big of a deal is this?

The bedrock of the Bible’s view of justice is not my inherent “rights” as God’s image, but rather the “moral” law of the supreme Law-Giver administered without partiality.

- Leviticus 19:37 — You shall observe all my statutes and all my rules [just judgments], and do them: **I am the LORD.**

It’s true that we can speak of this “moral law” because God has created us as moral beings in His image. God’s “moral” law applies to us because we have been created with a surpassing “worth” and “value” in His image. But our identity as God’s image is not the bedrock of the Bible’s view

of justice. To speak of my inherent rights is contrary to everything that we see in Scripture. And so by this subtle sleight of hand, something massive has happened. The supremacy and centrality of God has been replaced with the supremacy and centrality of man – which then leads to the second layer of the problem.

The image of God in man is not about man's inherent "rights" but rather about the inherent rights of God – God's right to have His image treated according to His will, and God's right to be accorded by His image true worship and obedience. This isn't saying the same thing just in a different way. This is fundamentally different – and fundamentally compromises the entire message of this video. In another video on the subject of "sin," we're told: "Every human is an image of God, a sacred being who represents the creator and is **worthy of respect**. And so in this way of seeing the world sin is a failure to love God and others by not treating **them** with the honor **they deserve**..." Notice how sin is explained within the primary context of man's identity as a "sacred being... worthy of respect." Notice, too, how what God deserves, man also deserves. Man is said to "deserve" in the same way that God is said to "deserve" because man is an image of God – a sacred being. And so very "subtly," sin against God is being *defined in terms of* sin against another human being. Man is deified (taking center stage) and God is "marginalized."

The video on "sin" explains: "When Joseph refuses to [lie] with the wife of Potiphar he says, 'How could I sin against God.' In Joseph's mind, **failing to honor a human** made in God's image is a **failure to love God**." If we take these words by themselves, we might agree wholeheartedly – for the most part. But in context, there's a deifying of Potiphar here as one who shares with God in certain inherent "rights" – who deserves "honor" even as God deserves "honor." While this video sets up in parallel the "rights" of Potiphar with the "rights" of God, that's not what David does after his adultery with Bathsheba and murder of Uriah.

➤ Psalm 51:4 — Against you, **you only**, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.

Is there any sense in which David has sinned against both Uriah and Bathsheba? Yes! But this sin against them had nothing to do with their inherent rights or what they inherently deserved. It's in this light that we have to understand David's conviction that he had sinned **only** against the Lord. We read in Genesis chapter nine:

➤ Genesis 9:6 — Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.

The point here is not man's inherent right as God's image (or else the image bearing murderer should never have his own blood shed). The point here is first of all the *rights* of God, and then secondly and derivatively, the awesome undeserved *privilege* of being His "image." We read in James:

➤ James 3:9–10 — With [the tongue] we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God... My brothers, these things ought not to be so.

Once again, we must not read into this verse my "inherent rights" as a human being, but rather see in this verse God's right to have His image treated according to His will. I can't emphasize

enough how a full and robust understanding of this truth will fundamentally compromise the entire message of this video. The first step in this video to a Gospel powerless to save is a subtle distinguishing between “God,” on the one hand, and God’s definition of good and evil on the other hand – a definition independent of God and to which God Himself conforms. The second step is a defining of good and evil in terms of man’s inherent “rights” as God’s image. Are you seeing the deifying of man and the “marginalizing” of God? This brings us to the third step.

“That would be nice if we all did that [treated everyone with dignity and fairness according to their rights]. But we know how the world really works. The Bible addresses that to. It shows how we are constantly redefining good and evil to our own advantage at the expense of others. Self-preservation. And the weaker someone is, the easier it is to take advantage of them. In the biblical story, we see this happening on a personal level, but also in families and then in communities and in whole civilizations that create injustice especially toward the vulnerable.”

There’s a lot of truth in these words! And yet, in context, another subtle shift is being made with massive consequences. What is “sin” and “injustice” biblically? We’re told that it’s the violation of man’s “right” to be treated with “dignity and fairness.” But given this definition of “sin” and “injustice” we can now take the next step in seeing sin and injustice primarily as that which is perpetrated against the weak and the vulnerable. Because the weak and the vulnerable are those most likely to have their inherent “rights” disregarded. I’m not denying that the *truly* weak and vulnerable are more easily—and therefore more likely to be—*truly* oppressed. The problem here is that because we’re thinking fundamentally in terms of man’s “rights,” it’s inevitable that we will start redefining what “dignity” and “fairness” looks like. And therefore it’s also inevitable that our ideas of “dignity” and “fairness” will come into irreconcilable conflict with the Bible. We’ll be forced either to *reinterpret* the Bible according to a new “man-centered” hermeneutic or to *discard* parts of the Bible as not really reflecting the definition of good and evil—of justice and injustice—to which God Himself conforms.

Multitudes of Christians don’t yet know that the “Gospel” they’re embracing will one day force them to reject the inerrancy and infallibility of God’s Word in all of its parts from beginning to end (cf. “The Jewish people believe that **through** all of these literary works God speaks to His people... The Apostles believed that God was speaking to His people **through** these texts alongside the Scriptures of Israel”; [“What Is the Bible?” video]).

- 1 Samuel 15:3 — Now go and strike Amalek and devote to destruction all that they have. Do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.

Even taking into account all the qualifications that are needed here, this in no way fits with the concept of man’s inherent “*rights*” as an image-bearer of God.

- Exodus 21:20–21 (cf. 21:2–4, 17) — When a man strikes his slave, male or female, with a rod and the slave dies under his hand, he shall be avenged. But if the slave survives a day or two, he is not to be avenged, for the slave is his money.

- Luke 17:7–10 — Will any one of you who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep say to him when he has come in from the field, “Come at once and recline at table”? Will he not rather say to him, “Prepare supper for me, and dress properly, and serve me while I eat and drink, and afterward you will eat and drink”? Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, “We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.”
- 1 Corinthians 7:20–21 — Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called. Were you a **bonds**ervant when called? Do not be concerned about it. (But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.)
- 1 Timothy 6:1–2 (cf. Eph. 6:5–9; Col. 3:22–4:1) — Let all who are under a yoke as **bonds**ervants regard their own **masters** as worthy of all honor... Those who have believing masters must not be disrespectful on the ground that [their masters] are brothers; rather they must serve all the better since those who benefit by their good service are believers and beloved.

As long as there was the institution of slavery in the Roman Empire, there was for many not even the *possibility* of “equal outcomes.” But this was not a primary concern for Paul. Paul’s primary concern was that in the church, the master and the slave be equal as brothers – though they still remained master and slave (“privileged” and “underprivileged”).

The first step in this video to a Gospel powerless to save is a subtle distinguishing between “God,” on the one hand, and God’s definition of good and evil on the other hand – a definition independent of God and to which God Himself conforms. The second step is a defining of good and evil in terms of my inherent “rights” as God’s image. The third step is beginning to redefine the “dignity and fairness” we’re said to “deserve” in terms of categories such as the “privileged” (those who are not weak and vulnerable) and the “underprivileged” (those who are weak and vulnerable; [see the behind the scenes for this video]). In this way, two classes in society are subtly introduced: The guilty and the not-guilty, the guilty and the innocent. In this light, the Apostle Paul himself, as a “privileged” Roman citizen, must be guilty of the worst sort of injustice when he tells Christian bondservants not to be concerned about their station in life. Clearly, Paul did not believe that bondservants had any inherent rights to “freedom” or to the possibility of “equal outcomes.” It’s against the backdrop of these three errors that the “redemption” offered in this false Gospel is introduced.

“But the story doesn’t end there. Out of this whole mess, God chose a man named Abraham to start a new kind of family. Specifically, Abraham was to teach his family to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice. Righteousness is an ethical standard that refers to right relationships *between* people. It’s about treating others as the image of God, with the God-given dignity they deserve.”

Notice how righteousness, for you, is defined here in terms of what “I deserve” while my righteousness is defined in terms of what “you deserve.” Righteousness is defined by personal “rights.” It’s defined horizontally and relationally rather than vertically and forensically (legally), which then prepares the way for redefining the nature of the atonement as well as the doctrine of justification (see video on Atonement).

In the Bible, true righteousness is not an “ethical standard” describing “right relationships between people” but rather a divine law that governs our standing before God and that extends to every area of life. Can you see the massive difference here between a righteousness defined in man-centered terms and a righteousness defined in God-centered terms? The very essence of righteousness is not something ethical but religious, not relational but forensic, not horizontal but vertical – living according to the **law of God** before the face of **God in every** area of life.

- Deuteronomy 6:25 — It will be **righteousness** for us, if we are careful to **do all this commandment before the LORD our God, as he has commanded us.**
- Isaiah 42:21 — The LORD was pleased, for his **righteousness**’ sake, to magnify **his law** and make it glorious.
- Isaiah 51:7 (cf. Lk. 1:6; Mat. 23:28; Ps. 119:142) — Listen to me, you who know **righteousness**, the people in whose heart is **my law.**
- Romans 2:13 — It is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but **the doers of the law** who will be **justified [declared righteous].**

That’s righteousness. But then what about “justice”? We’re told in the video:

Justice can refer to retributive justice, like if I steal something I pay the consequences. Yet most often in the Bible *mispat* refers to restorative justice. It means going a step further. Actually seeking out vulnerable people who are being taken advantage of and helping them. Some people call this charity. But *mispat* means way more. It means taking steps to advocate for the vulnerable and changing social structures to prevent injustice. So justice and righteousness are about a radical, selfless way of life. You find this idea all over the Bible.

Actually, you won’t find this idea anywhere in the Bible. Justice, we’re told, is “charity” and “way more” than charity. I’m reminded of a book published in 2014 titled, “Just Mercy.” In other words, what this video is telling us here is that “justice” is in some way interchangeable with words like “compassion” and “mercy.” But when we confuse justice with mercy, or even with charity or compassion, the cross itself is inevitably emptied of its true meaning and power.

Justice in the Bible is always “*distributive*.” In other words, it always has to do with distributing to people their *just deserts* before the law. This has nothing to do with any inherent rights due to my identity as God’s image, but only to the rights graciously afforded to me under the law. So in Exodus, when God unpacks how the Ten Commandments are to be applied, He begins with these words:

- Exodus 21:1 — Now these are the rules [the just judgments; *mispat*] that you shall set before them.

And if you read through those just judgments (cf. Exod. 21-24), you’ll see that retributive and “restorative” justice (that’s a dangerous phrase) are never separated from each other (as though there’s this “kind” of justice and that “kind” of justice) but are always two sides of the same coin – “distributive justice,” distributing to everyone their just deserts before the law without partiality. That’s justice. That’s the doing of justice.

- Leviticus 19:15 (cf. Exod. 23:3, 6; Deut. 1:17) — You shall do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor.
- Luke 18:2–5 — [Jesus] said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, ‘**Give me justice against my adversary.**’”
- Revelation 18:20 & 19:1–3 (cf. Ps. 58:10) — Rejoice over her, O heaven, and you saints and apostles and prophets, for **God has given judgment for you against her!** ... Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for his judgments are true and just; for he has judged the great prostitute who corrupted the earth with her immorality, and has avenged on her the blood of his servants.”

There is such a thing as compassion, and charity, and mercy, but justice is not any of these things (cf. Isa. 30:18; Hos. 2:19). And complicating all of this is the underlying problem of having already defined good and evil in terms of my own “inherent rights” as the image of God. Injustice, therefore, is whenever I’ve not been treated as I deserve to be treated – according to my inherent rights. “Restorative” justice, then, is restoring to me all that I’ve ever been robbed of in terms of these inherent rights. I hope we can see that nothing in all the world could be more unbiblical or anti-God.

In support of the video’s statement that justice is everywhere in the Bible depicted as a radically selfless way of life, we’re offered this Scripture (among others).

- Proverbs 31:8-9 – Bring about just righteousness. Open your mouth for those who can’t speak for themselves.

What we’re not told is that this is actually the role of the king administering judicial decisions in accordance with the “Book of the Covenant” in Exodus 21-24.

- Proverbs 31:1–9 — It is not for kings, O Lemuel, it is not for kings to drink wine, or for rulers to take strong drink, lest they drink and forget what has been decreed and pervert the rights of all the afflicted... Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute. Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.

Doing justice is not about a radically selfless way of life (though as Christians we are called to such a life; Lk. 9:23; Mk. 12:28-31), but “deliver[ing] from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed [that’s the role of the judge]. And do[ing] no wrong or violence to the resident alien, the fatherless, and the widow, nor [shedding] innocent blood” (Jer. 22:1-3).

Why is it so important in this false Gospel to identify justice with mercy, love, and charity? Because then “mercy,” “love,” and “charity” can all be legislated by men (not just politically, but even in the church) and true, distributive justice can be perverted. Guilt can be assigned. Penance can be required. “Forgiveness” can be granted—or withheld – all for the failure to “love.” Do you see the terrible danger, here, and the blatant assault on God’s sovereignty? What this false Gospel is actually all about is the acquiring of power. The video continues:

“*Rasa* [wicked] means guilty or in the wrong. It refers to someone who mistreats another human, ignoring *their dignity* as an image of God.”

Your guilt and wickedness is defined as ignoring my dignity while my guilt and wickedness is defined as ignoring your dignity. Do you see here, again, the “marginalizing” of God and the deifying of man? The producers of this video would deny any such intention, but the problem is that it’s already happened by definition.

“So justice and righteousness is a big deal to God. It’s what Abraham’s family, the Israelites, were to be all about. They ended up as immigrant slaves being oppressed unjustly in Egypt. And so God confronted Egypt’s evil, declaring them to be *rasa*, guilty of injustice.”

God never declared Egypt to be *rasa*. God never once confronted Pharaoh with his “injustice” but only with His own sovereign rights to His people – His “firstborn” (cf. Exod. 4:22-23; 5:1-3). The problem here is that the video is beginning to read every passage in the Bible through this artificial, man-made lens of “justice” versus “injustice.”

“So he rescued Israel. But the tragic irony of the OT story is that these redeemed people went on to commit the same acts of injustice against the vulnerable. And so God sent prophets who declared Israel guilty. But they weren’t the only ones. There’s injustice everywhere. Some people actively perpetrate injustice. Others receive benefits or privileges from unjust social structures they take for granted. And sadly, history has shown that when the oppressed gain power, they often become oppressors themselves. So we all participate in injustice, actively or passively. Even unintentionally. We’re all the guilty ones.”

And suddenly, just like that, we’ve introduced a whole new category of “sin” – a category of sin never found in the Bible: **Passive—even unintentional—“injustice”** – injustice having already been *defined* in terms of my inherent rights and justice having already been *equated* with mercy, love, and charity. But given these definitions of justice and injustice, it should be obvious that identifying a truly “unjust social structure” will be full of problems. If I receive benefits or privileges from what I’m told is an unjust social structure, then I must not be trying to change that structure, and therefore I’m automatically “guilty” of injustice. I may even be passively and unintentionally benefiting from an unjust social structure, but that also makes me “guilty.” Do you see, now, how the whole of our lives can be “legislated”? Guilt assigned. Penance required. “Forgiveness” granted—or withheld. Do you see how this Gospel is all about the acquiring of power and the usurping of the sovereignty of God? The Apostle Paul—as a Roman citizen—was preeminently guilty in the letters that he penned not only of passive, but of active injustice. Indeed, as this video says, “We’re all the guilty ones” – as soon as we’re no longer oppressed.

Actually, here’s what the video really says: “*When the oppressed gain power, they often become oppressors themselves.*” When the “oppressed” today gain power, it’s just possible that they may create a society where there are no unjust social structures and therefore where they remain in a state of “righteous innocence.” And so the deifying of man and the marginalizing of God continues.

Brothers and sisters, searching our hearts for “extra-biblical” “sin” is not a sign of true humility, but of self-righteousness – a self-made “piety” and “spirituality.” And now we’re as ready as we can be for the thoroughly domesticated Jesus of this false Gospel that is powerless to save.

“So this is the surprising message of the biblical story. God’s response to humanity’s legacy of injustice is to give us a gift, the life of Jesus. He did righteousness and justice and yet he died on behalf of the guilty. But then God declared Jesus to be the righteous one when He rose from the dead. And so now Jesus offers his life to the guilty so that they, too can be declared righteous before God not because of anything they’ve done, but because of what Jesus did for them. The earliest followers of Jesus experienced this righteousness from God not just as a new status, but as a power that changed their lives and compelled them to act in surprising new ways. If God declared someone righteous when they didn’t deserve it, the only reasonable response is to go and seek righteousness and justice for others.”

While this may appeal very powerfully to a false sense of piety and spirituality (which is what makes it so attractive to so many today), there is nothing of the true Gospel here. There is nothing of God’s true supremacy and glory. There is nothing of our true sin and depravity. There is nothing of Christ’s true person and work. And therefore, there is no hope of salvation.

“If God declared someone righteous when they didn’t deserve it,” we’re told, “the only reasonable response is to go and seek righteousness and justice for others. The righteousness that God imputes to us who *didn’t* deserve it is *equated* with the righteousness and justice that we then seek for others – who *do* deserve it. In the “behind the scenes” for this video, one of the writers says this: “It’s tough for us to make decisions on who has received Christ’s righteousness and who hasn’t. Because just because you’ve received the righteousness of God doesn’t mean you don’t experience injustice anymore.” And so we see that in the end, even to preach the true Gospel to those labeled “underprivileged” or “oppressed” (and therefore, “not guilty”) must be—*itself*—a form of injustice.

“This is a radical way of life and it’s not always convenient or easy. It’s courageously making other people’s problems my problems. This is what Jesus meant by loving your neighbor as yourself. It’s about a lifetime commitment fueled by the words of the ancient prophet Micah: ‘God has told you, humans, what is good, and what the Lord requires of you is to do justice, to love mercy [kindness; steadfast love], and to walk humbly with your God.’”

Conclusion

- 2 Corinthians 11:14 — Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light.
- Galatians 1:9 [NET] — If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be condemned to hell.
- Romans 1:16–17 — For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”