

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

Locked in Solidarity – 2024

Rev. Dr. Kevin Riggs and Rev. Kevin Burns

When I was growing up, my dad taught Teacher Education classes at a local college. In fact, he put the entire Teacher Education program together at that college. My dad is a teacher's teacher. Part of his responsibilities as chairman of the Teacher Education Department was that he supervised student teachers. This meant all through my school years, especially elementary school, my dad had student teachers at my schools and in my classrooms. I suspect he did this on purpose. As a kid who regularly found himself in the principal's office, this was a problem.

All my principals and most of my teachers were friends and colleagues of my dad. More than once, I would be sent to the principal's office for misbehaving only to hear, "*Kevin. Just sit right there. Your dad will be here in a minute to evaluate his student teachers. You can tell him what you have done this time.*"

I never got away with anything at school. My dad always sided with the teachers over me. Most of the time, he was correct in doing so. Dad was never satisfied with just scolding me or making me go to my room when I got home. More often than not, he would make me write a note to my teacher and personally go and apologize the next day. Sometimes I had to do this in front of the entire class. I hated that! But one thing it taught me was to take responsibility for my actions and to try and make things right. I didn't know it at the time, but what my dad was teaching me was restorative justice.

What is Restorative Justice?

One reason, maybe one of the main reasons, our criminal justice system is full of injustice is because, at its root, our system is built on punitive justice instead of restorative justice.

Punitive justice says, "*Don't do the crime if you can't do the time.*" Punitive justice believes people get what they deserve. Punitive justice is all about punishment. There is little redemptive power in punitive justice. As such, punitive justice is not justice at all, and neither is it biblical.

On the other hand, restorative justice seeks to redeem what was harmed, lost, or broken. Restorative justice seeks to redeem the perpetrator of a crime or an injustice, as well as redeeming the victim of a crime or injustice. Restorative justice also involves the entire community. Restorative justice is true justice. Restorative justice is biblical.

Restorative justice is the theme for this year's *Locked In Solidarity* Week. Our working definition of restorative justice is as follows:

"Restorative justice is a framework and process, rooted in indigenous teachings, that starts with the needs of people who have been harmed, brings the impacted community together,

and facilitates true accountability — acknowledgment, repair, and change that ensures harm will not be repeated."

Restorative justice, then, is about the persons who have experienced harm, the persons who have caused the harm, the community that is harmed as a result, and steps that can be taken to begin the healing process for everyone involved.

Why is Restorative Justice Biblical?

Restorative justice is biblical because restorative justice is rooted in the character of God. God is not just a God of justice. He is a God of restorative justice. At times, God's justice may seem punitive. But it is not. At its core, even God's supposed punitive justice is meant to be restorative.

The Tower of Babel

Consider the story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11:1-9.¹ Because of pride, arrogance, and idolatry, "...*the LORD confused the language of the whole world*" (v. 11). That sounds punitive, but it was meant to be restorative. By confusing the languages, "...*the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth*" (v. 11).

As a result of this "punishment," we have the beauty of diversity and ethnicities. Now, and one day soon, in the beauty of all the different languages, we sing and will sing, "*Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and unto the Lamb*" (Revelation 6:10).

On the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2, the Holy Spirit came and Jesus' followers "...*began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them*" (Acts 2:4). Then, when Peter preached the very first Christian sermon, people from several different cultures, ethnicities, and languages, heard what he said in their own language (Acts 2:5-6). Think about that. On the Day of Pentecost, the curse of Babel was restored through the Holy Spirit.

Sodom and Gomorrah

Or consider the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19:1-29. Because of grave sins, God destroyed both cities with fire. Again, that sounds punitive, but it was meant to be restorative. Ezekiel tells us, "*Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughter (Gomorrah) were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy. They were haughty and did detestable thing before me. Therefore, I did away with them as you have seen*" (Ezekiel 16:49-50).

But the story doesn't stop there. Ezekiel concludes the story by telling us God said, "*I will restore the fortunes of Sodom and her daughter...and your fortunes along with them...And*

¹ Pastor Kevin Riggs prefers the New International Version.

your sisters, Sodom with her daughters (Gomorrhah)...will return to what they were before, and you...will return to what you were before” (Ezekiel 16:53-55). Complete restoration.

Also, consider the encounter Jesus had with the woman caught in adultery in John 8:1-11. The law required her to be executed, punitive justice. But Jesus forgave her and restored her back to her community.

God promised restoration immediately after Adam and Eve’s disobedience in Genesis 3:15. All through Scripture, you see God reaching down and reaching out, to restore and reconcile the world to Himself. The Apostle Paul wrote, “...*God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ...*” (2 Corinthians 5:19).

I have been taught, and I still believe, that the primary characteristic of God is holiness. Thus, God’s love is a holy love, God’s mercy is a holy mercy, and God’s justice is a holy justice. Restorative justice, not punitive justice, is a holy justice.

But that’s enough from me. I want you to hear from my good friend and pastor, Rev. Kevin Burns, who understands restorative justice better than me and is someone who lives out restorative justice every day. But before I turn it over to Pastor Burns, let me repeat one thing I said earlier. The main problem with our criminal justice system is that it is built on punitive justice instead of restorative justice. That must change, and we, the people of God, must embrace the challenge to make that change.

Pastor Kevin Burns

This year's theme is restorative justice, and I feel that God has revealed unto me a few things about His justice and how it is restorative. Pastor Riggs and I both believe that God is a God of restorative justice. The intent of God’s heart is to restore people and the world unto Himself.

There are two passages of Scripture I want to read and point out how they relate to restorative justice: 2 Corinthians 5:14-21 and Isaiah 46:9-10.²

Let’s begin with the words of Isaiah.

Isaiah 46:9-10 – *“Remember the former things of old: for I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure:’”*

Isaiah’s words give us a peek into the heart and mind of God from the *“beginning, and from ancient times.”* In other words, God knew the end before He even began the beginning, and then He knew the end before the beginning. God knows everything, and God has a plan for everything. There is no one like God.

Before God created the world; before God created the garden and all the plants and all the animals, both on land and in the sea; before God created Adam; before it all, God knew what was

² Pastor Kevin Burns prefers the King James Version.

going to happen. God knew Adam and Eve would give into temptation and fall. God knew all of that, yet at the end of creation week, the Bible records, “*God saw everything that he had made, and, behold, it was very good*” (Genesis 1:31).

We know how the story unfolds. We know Adam and Eve disobeyed, and we know the results of that disobedience. Adam and Eve were cast out of the Garden and separated from God. But we also know that immediately God had a plan for restoration. God reached down to Adam and Eve and showed the path back to Him.

Immediately after they had sinned, God said to the serpent, “*Because thou has done this, thou art cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field; upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life*” (Genesis 3:14). And then, here it is. Here is God’s plan for forgiveness. Here is God’s path back to Himself. Here is the first verse in the Bible about restorative justice.

God continued, “*And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel*” (Genesis 3:15). God said there is a day coming when He will send the Messiah (the seed of the woman), and while the serpent would hurt the Messiah, the Messiah would destroy the serpent and bring reconciliation and restoration between God and man. Thus, God declared “*the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure’*” (Isaiah 46:10).

Let’s not rush past this too quickly. God was saying that all the wrong that had taken place, and all the wrong that will take place because of Adam and Eve’s disobedience, God will forgive and restore mankind to their rightful place. From the very beginning, God said He would send His Son to restore mankind back to Himself. This causes me to believe that God is a God of restorative justice. All of His judgments are just, and all of His judgments are restorative.

Restoration Throughout the Bible

We immediately see the length God’s restorative justice will go in the story of Cain murdering his brother Abel in Genesis 4:1-26. You know the story. After killing his brother, God came to Cain and asked, “*Where is Abel?*” (v. 9). Cain replied, “*Am I my brother’s keeper?*” (v. 9). God then said to Cain, “*Thy brother’s blood crieth unto me from the ground*” (v. 10). God then banished Cain “*from the earth*” (v. 11) and said that Cain and his descendants would be “*a fugitive and a vagabond...in the earth*” (v. 12). Cain then cried out to God, “*My punishment is greater than I can bear*” (v. 13).

Then God did something unique and important. Once again, even though God’s actions toward Cain were harsh, they were also restorative. God placed some sort of mark on Cain that distinguished him and protected him from those who would want to do him harm. Through that mark, God was saying to Cain and to the world that His judgment was just and was enough. Thus, anyone who tried to go beyond God’s restorative judgment by implanting punitive judgment on Cain would take on Cain’s curse “*sevenfold*” (v. 15). As someone who has been

unjustly cursed by the State of Tennessee beyond what God allows, and only what is punitive, I find hope in the way God treated Cain and hope in the restorative justice of God. Regardless of man's desire to punish, God's greater desire is to reconcile and restore.

God's restorative justice is seen all through the Bible. I want to mention just a few examples. But as I do so, don't forget the words of Isaiah. God has not changed. He has been a God of restorative justice "*from the beginning, and from ancient times.*"

- Moses murdered a man and was then banished to the desert. One could say Moses was incarcerated in the wilderness for forty years. But then, through the burning bush, God restored Moses and sent him back to his community to lead his people out of slavery.
- On multiple occasions, Abraham lied and practiced deceit. Yet God restored him. He became the Father of our faith. And not just our faith, but also the faith of Jews and Muslims. The Bible says of Abraham, "*And he believed in the LORD; and He counted it to him for righteousness*" (Genesis 15:6).
- David was a man after God's own heart. Yet, he committed adultery and murder. But that did not define David. God restored him and made him the greatest king of Israel.
- Nebuchadnezzar despised Daniel's God and believed himself to be god. Yet, God humbled him and restored him. Nebuchadnezzar blessed God and praised God, promoted Daniel, and became the great king of Babylon.
- Peter denied Jesus three times. Yet God restored him and made him the key leader in the early church.
- Saul persecuted the early church and stoned Stephen. Yet, Jesus met Saul on the Damascus Road, changed his name to Paul, and used him to write thirteen of the twenty-seven New Testament books.

Here is the point of all of this. God is a God of restorative justice, and that restorative justice is made perfect and complete in Jesus Christ. God promised the Messiah in Genesis, and Isaiah prophesied about Him. In fact, the restorative justice of God, found in Jesus, is THE story of Scripture. All of the Old Testament and the New Testament proclaim this message. That is what is meant by Isaiah's prophecy, "*Remember the former things of old: for I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure:.'*" (Isaiah 46:9-10).

Restored to Restore

Now, let's look at 2 Corinthians 5:14-21.

2 Corinthians 5:14-21 – *“For the love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead: And that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again. Wherefore henceforth know we no man after the flesh: yea, though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now henceforth know we him no more. Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new. And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation; To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation. Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God. For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.”*

Through faith in Jesus Christ, we are reconciled back to God. Paul declares in 2 Corinthians 2:17, *“Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.”*

That is complete restoration! What was lost in Adam is given back to us in Christ. We are not partially restored, and our reconciliation does not happen over time. We are immediately restored, immediately reconciled, immediately redeemed, and immediately made right with God.

Next, and this is really the best part, after being reconciled to God through faith in Jesus Christ, God gives us the ministry of reconciliation. Paul writes, *“And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation... God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation”* (vv. 18-19).

How awesome is that! God doesn't take inventory of our sins. Through Christ, God forgives our sins and restores us back to Himself. But God doesn't just restore us. He gives us the responsibility and privilege to take this good news to others and show them the path of restoration and reconciliation.

We are God's ambassadors, and here is our message, *“Be ye reconciled to God”* (v. 20). All of this is made possible through faith in Jesus Christ, *“For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him”* (v. 21). Hallelujah and Amen.

CONCLUSION

Let me conclude by offering a summary: Isaiah tells us that before the beginning, God had a plan of restoration, a plan of reconciling all the world to Himself. God created the world and said that everything was good. But through the disobedience of Adam, sin entered the world. That sin separated us from God. We are broken and in need of a Savior.

God's plan of restoration, reconciliation, and redemption was through the promise of a Messiah, Jesus, God's Son, God Himself. Jesus is the fulfillment of God's restorative justice for you and me and all the world. Through faith in Jesus Christ, we are forgiven, we are restored, we are reconciled to God. God then gives us the ministry of telling others how they can be reconciled and restored back to God. The Apostle Paul summarized God's restorative justice better than I can. He wrote, "*For as by one man's disobedience (Adam) many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one (Jesus) shall many be made righteous*" (Romans 5:19).

I praise God that He has restored me. I praise God that through faith in Jesus Christ, I am not what the court system says I am. I am redeemed. I am reconciled. I am restored, and I have been given the ministry of reconciliation. That is my purpose. That is my calling. And it is your calling as well.

Let me close with a prayer:

*Gracious and eternal God,
in the name of Jesus our Lord, we thank You.
We thank You that You are a just God, perfect and righteous in all Your ways.
I thank You, Lord God, that Your justice and Your mercy are extended unto us.*

*I thank You, Lord God, that You redeemed me.
You restored me back in righteousness.
You reconciled me back to Yourself
and have given me a clear mind and a clear conscience.
A conscience that is without guilt.
A conscience that is clean, Lord God.
You have also given me a spirit that is clean.
You have renewed me and given me peace in my spirit,
in my mind, in my body,
and have made peace between Yourself and me.
Lord, I thank You.*

*And then, through Your grace found in Jesus,
You sought out opportunities, according to the Scripture,
to have mercy on all who will call upon Your name.
I pray, Lord, that we as a people will come to know You
and Your restorative justice.
That we will come to know You in righteousness.
That we will come to know You are the God of restoration.
You are a God who loves mercy and seeks mercy out.
You are a God who is waiting for Your people to call upon Your name.*

*Lord, I pray we come to know You as the just God You are.
Lord, we bless You, we honor You,
and we praise You for all of this and many other wonderful blessings.
In Christ Jesus, we pray.
Amen and Amen.*