

“Sanctuary Cities”

JOSHUA 20:1-9; HEBREWS 6:17-20

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Congregation of Christ: Do you know what Machiavellianism is? The word comes from the Italian Renaissance diplomat and writer Niccolò Machiavelli, born in 1469, who wrote the popular book *The Prince*. In this book, Machiavelli proposed that all actions, whether good or evil, the state exercises to achieve and preserve its power are justified. In time, his proposition was summarized as, “the end justifies the means.” Individually, one can deceive, lie, steal, even commit murder, to achieve success.

Machiavellianism is being practiced today by all churches who support sanctuary cities for illegal immigrants. According to CBS’ 60 Minutes, more than 800 churches have volunteered to make their churches “sanctuary” churches. A Methodist pastor in Philadelphia justifies this action, saying, “When a law breaks the backs of God’s people then it’s time for us to think about breaking those laws.” This false shepherd has a twisted definition of “God’s people”: God’s people are unlawful, lawbreaking aliens. And Instead of working to change the law, this pastor advocates breaking the law. Enough of the Bible’s commands to obey the civil government, even when that civil government is oppressive and evil, as the Roman Empire was in the days of Jesus and Paul (Matt 22:21; Rom 13:1-7).

Our text today is used and abused by those who support “sanctuary cities.” But how is this text related to the discussion about sanctuary cities?

A Demonstration of God’s Justice and Mercy Toward Lawbreakers

After distributing the Promised Land to the 12 tribes, Joshua’s next task is to establish six “cities of refuge” throughout Israel. This goes back again to God’s command to Moses, years before Israel conquered and settled the Promised Land, in Numbers 35:11-12. There will be three each east and west of the Jordan River. On each side, there will be one in the north, one in the center, and one in the south. In the east, the three cities are Golan, Ramoth-Gilead and Bezer. In the west, they are Kedesh, Shechem and Hebron. So all Israel will have access to these “cities of refuge” within a day’s travel.

But what is the purpose of these cities? Verse 3 states, *“that the manslayer who strikes any person without intent or unknowingly may flee there. They shall be for you a refuge from the avenger of blood.”* They were assigned to those who have committed accidental or unintentional death, to avoid vengeance from the families of the victims. What constitutes accidental or unintentional death? We read the explanation in Exodus 21:12-14,

Whoever strikes a man so that he dies shall be put to death. But if he did not lie in wait for him, but God let him fall into his hand, then I will appoint for you a place to which he may flee. But if a man willfully attacks another to kill him by cunning, you shall take him from my altar, that he may die.

Our laws regarding manslaughter, homicide, and murder go back to Biblical law. A murderer is one who willfully kills another by “cunning,” by “lying in wait,” or in other words, “premeditated murder.” A murderer will be executed. This is our basis today for capital punishment.

But if the death is unintentional or accidental, he may flee to a city of refuge. An example is given in Deuteronomy 19:5: if two men went to cut wood in the forest, and one swings his axe and the axehead slips from the handle and strikes and kills the other man, then it is an unintentional death. Today, we might charge this man with negligent homicide or manslaughter because he didn’t make sure that his axe was safe to use.

Therefore, these cities demonstrated God’s justice in dealing with lawbreakers. His justice is always right and fair. Murderers were executed. Those who caused unintentional death were also punished for negligence, but still received mercy. The sanctity of life cannot be ignored.

Offenders were to wait in the cities of refuge until their cases were heard. Therefore, the “cities of refuge” were never intended to be today’s “sanctuary cities” providing shelter for illegal aliens, especially for those who have committed crimes. Jails and prisons are our modern “cities of refuge,” not sanctuary cities where illegal aliens are free to roam without fear of arrest.

The Satisfaction of God’s Justice and Mercy Toward Lawbreakers

Verses 4-6 of Joshua 20 gives us the details of how one who is charged with the unintentional death of another is tried by the city’s elders. The defendant pleads his case before them. If the elders determine that the death was unintentional, he is welcomed into the city of refuge. The elders are then required by law to ensure two things. First, they are to protect the defendant from the avenger of blood until he goes back to the city where the crime was committed to stand trial. If the person is found guilty of manslaughter, he is returned to the city of refuge. Second, the elders must also make sure that the person remains in the city of refuge until the high priest dies. If he goes outside the city, and the avenger of blood finds him there and kills him, the avenger is not liable for murder. But after the high priest dies, the defendant could return home free and without fear of reprisal.

In this law, the sentence against the person guilty of manslaughter is like a life sentence. The city of refuge is his prison because he couldn’t go outside the city, though he could live a normal life inside the city. If the person dies before the high priest dies, then it’s a life sentence. But if the high priest dies before him, then he has served his full sentence, and is set free back to his home city. This law seems to say that the death of the high priest symbolizes the atonement for the guilt of the convicted person.

This arrangement is a picture of the death of Jesus Christ, our Great High Priest. With his death, he has atoned for all the sins of all guilty sinners like us who deserve capital punishment. But his death is infinitely greater than the death of the high priest of the city of refuge. Christ atoned not only for one crime of one person, but for all the sins of all people who would believe

in him (Tit 2:14). And his death is not a repeatable sacrifice for sins, but a once-for-all atonement for sins (Heb 7:27).

But God was not merciful and gracious only to the citizens of Israel. We read in verse 9 that this law also applies to aliens and sojourners living legally in their land. The Lord extends his mercy towards all, whether Jews or non-Jews. That's why Paul reminds the Ephesian believers of the change in their status from aliens to citizens of God's household (Eph 2:19). Still, our status in this world is that of strangers and exiles sojourning in this world because our citizenship is in heaven (Heb 11:10, 13-16).

Dear friends, from this short chapter in the Book of Joshua, we see a glimpse of the new covenant of grace that God has made with his people. His grace expanded to all who call upon his name, from Israel to all the nations of the world. Our Lord Jesus Christ came into the world to be our Great High Priest who would sacrifice himself on the cross for the sins of all who would believe in him.

With his finished work on the cross, Christ has become our City of Refuge. In Psalm 46:1, we read these words of comfort and assurance, *"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble."* When the world around us is filled with violence, confusion, rebellion against God, and rebellion against God-ordained authorities; when even "Christian" churches advocate lawlessness: God is our City of Refuge, our Strong Fortress.

Every Lord's Day in the City of God, the Church, we take a break from the turmoil around us, and find comfort, solace and peace. While the cities of the world are in turmoil, the City of God is like a river whose peaceful streams make us glad and assured. While we still suffer in our earthly City of God, he protects, preserves and strengthens our faith (Psa 46:4-5).

But we also read in Psalm 46 that God can cause mountains to fall into the sea, and make the seas roar to the land. We remember and pray today for Florida and in all the places where Hurricane Irma is wreaking havoc. In verse 8, it is also God who sends desolations on the earth. But God does not randomly select places to send his hurricanes, earthquakes and fires. He doesn't punish states for voting Democrat or Republican. He doesn't send earthquakes only to unbelievers. On the contrary, from the day that Adam and Eve fell into sin, the curse of sin and death fell into all the world and into all the people of the world. From that day on, life for all people on earth will be filled with sin, suffering, natural and man-made disasters, and violence.

And when the world is engulfed in violence and disasters, the writer of Hebrews encourages us to flee to our City of Refuge, Jesus Christ our Strong Deliverer, that

we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek (Heb 6:18-20).

All of you who have made Christ your City of Refuge are assured that the crimes you commit against God and against your neighbor every day have been forgiven through the death of our merciful High Priest. Even the vilest offender, even the most wicked murderer in this world, can be saved by faith alone in Christ alone. But he has commissioned his Church to welcome sinful aliens and strangers who are seeking refuge and comfort from sin and death. Their only City of Refuge from sin and death is Christ, whom they will believe and trust only by hearing his gospel preached in the church on the Lord's Day.

We have no other city of refuge today except Christ alone. In this city, we all are aliens and strangers, traveling toward our heavenly city of refuge. Whenever we commit sin, we are to flee to Christ, our City of Refuge. But when our heavenly City of Refuge comes, we will never commit any sin against God and neighbor, for we will all be perfected in him.