

City of Refuge

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As cities grow they become more dense and more diverse. With 150 people a day moving to Austin, wealth creeping to the west, and gentrification in the east, urbanization creates opportunity for creativity and conflict, new experiences and new challenges. It's a bit grim, but injustice increases with density. Crime rises. How should we respond? Move to the burbs? Ignore it? Our passage contains a pattern for responding to brokenness in a city. While far from offering a comprehensive plan for coping with urbanization, it does offer helpful insights around three images: City of Refuge, the Perpetrator, High Priest.

City of Refuge

After dividing the land of Canaan among the tribes of Israel, Joshua establishes cities of refuge. *A city of refuge was a place where a person who committed involuntary manslaughter could find asylum*, protection from a vengeful person, family, or tribe. The notion of a city of refuge was put forward by Moses in the first five books of the Bible, where he describes the creation of three cities east of the Jordan river. Now Israel is west of the Jordan, Joshua establishes three more cities of refuge, bringing the total to six. These six cities were almost exactly the same distance apart—why?—to put justice within reach, accessible to anyone. Now what **happened** in a city of refuge? Say you're cutting wood in the forest, and your axe hits the tree the axe head flies off impales someone who dies from the injury (Deut 19). What do you do? How do you avoid someone murdering you? You could flee to a sacred city, occupied by the priestly class, and request a trial. The elders would hear the case. How would that go? Wasn't it primitive? Jewish Law was pretty sophisticated for the time. We see this in three ways. First, they judged a person based on **motive: 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**" (20:3). Motive is a centerpiece of western justice, but it wasn't always that way. In some societies motive didn't matter. If you killed someone, someone would kill you. But Scripture says, *Man judges according to appearance but God looks at the heart*. Seeing the heart, Jesus says if we say something mean about a brother, we have murder in the heart. Say you're online, and news breaks about an injustice: racism, assault, war, cultural appropriation. We quickly show our support by liking or favoriting a post, but then we notice others haven't done so. Suddenly, we begin to judge them as uncaring about *our* belief, *our* cause. We disregard motive and judge appearance. What if they are still thinking the issues? What if they aren't called to this particular issue the way you are? What if they are still maturing in the area of justice? All that goes out the door when we fail to consider motive. We ought be slow to be offended. Generous in our thoughts because we prize motive over appearance. Second, two **witnesses** were required to convict: **no person shall be put to death on the testimony of one witness** (Num 35:30). Third, **ransom** wasn't allowed. If a person did take a life, intentionally or by accident, they couldn't buy their way out of it. You could: 1) run for your life to a city of refuge for trial 2) or if it was intentional, retribution, a life for a life. Of course, neither are ideal. *Asylum* meant you got to live but in isolation and exile from your family, way of life, home—for years, decades, and in some cases your entire life. The alternative was *Execution*, which meant two people would die: the murdered and murderer. Broken city. Yet these cities of refuge point to something greater.

The Perpetrator

When we see genocidal leaders tried for war crimes, Nassar convicted, or a reckless driver get pulled over, a part of us rejoices. In what? **Justice**. Getting what they deserve. But where does that longing come from? Who's to say what is just? Aren't genocidal leaders carrying out their atheistic worldviews to the logical conclusion? If there is no God, then why not snatch power for yourself? On what basis do we determine assault is wrong? Isn't Nassar follows the impulses of social Darwinism, survival of the fittest? It may feel wrong, but how do we know it's wrong? How do we determine what is just? Returning to the homicide in the woods, if the person who died was a family member, say a father, then Hittite law allowed you to murder not the person with the axe but their father! This wasn't eye for eye; it's someone else's eye for an eye. The innocent for the guilty! But Jewish Law made no such allowance. Life was held in high regard, and grounded in justice not vengeance. Only intentional homicide was permitted the death penalty. Life for a life. **Why?** In Jewish belief, blood on the ground meant God's dwelling place had been contaminated. The holiness of God requires justice. Holiness meant he valued human life, and because of that, blood could be shed lightly. In the words of 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 Bible gives us a reason for justice, and it's not shifting human worldviews, but because God is holy, and because he's holy, his creation—humanity in his image—is sacred. And that is why murder is wrong. Our longings for justice are rooted in the holiness of God, not the holiness of humanity. We are the problem not the solution. Which brings us to this: where do we stand before a holy God? What would it look like for you to seek justice? *Begin my allowing holiness to influence how you view others on social media. Don't leap to judgment. Avoid tribalism. Be generous. Show up to mercy ministries to serve the marginalized. Instead of averting your eyes from the homeless, look them in the eye and smile. Hand them a ReWork card so they can get off the streets, get a job, and dignity.* But even our best attempts at justice are flawed. We need, long for something else, **mercy**, also seen in the city of refuge. The perpetrator shall: live in it until the death of the high priest who was anointed with the holy oil. (Nu 35:25). Once the high priest died, you could return to your family, city, life. But why does the death of the high priest trigger mercy? Notice, holy oil anointing the priest. No ordinary person could atone for the perp, but a holy person could because the crime was ultimately against the holy Creator. As priests, the Levites qualified. While the NT makes no connection between the death of the high priest and the death of Christ for us to obtain mercy before holy God, it is hard not to see some parallel. Mercy that deals with the greatest injustice of all! However, the connection between the high priest and Jesus *isn't in his death but in his life.* Hebrews describes Jesus priestly ministry of mercy: For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. This means, as a living high priest, Jesus is in touch with our frailty. He knows we are tempted to write off the homeless, the racist, the person with a different political view. He knows we are weak. He knows we lack mercy for people who disagree with us, for spouses, neighbors, family members. He knows our attempts at justice are often inadequate and twisted. Even knowing this, he is merciful and sympathetic toward us. Will Campbell was a white southerner who was an activist, friend of MLK, and minister to the incarcerated. Campbell was so respected his obituary appeared on the front page of the NY Times in 2013. One day, in his 70s, he took a team to minister to inmates at the Tennessee Department of Correction. Approaching the entrance, a guard stopped his

team and told them they couldn't enter because of the kind of shoes one member was wearing. When Will asked for leniency, the guard snapped: "One more word out of you and none of you will see anyone here today!" After driving to a nearby town to purchase new shoes they returned and were allowed in. afterwards, Will mourned his reaction to the guard. He wondered how he might have responded to the guard more mercifully. Reflecting on this encounter, David Dark shares that Will was urging him to look harder and more humbly at people he's tempted to dismiss, to people who have wronged him, and not reduce a person to the madness of a single moment. Mercy. Who have you reduced to the madness of a single moment? Judged based on a single to set of flaws? The true High Priest sympathizes and shows mercy, supremely in dying for flawed people. Who might you see differently in the light of Christ's mercy? Do this and we make much of our High Priest in heaven. Lets allow holy justice and priestly mercy to shine through us, like a healing light, touching the corners of our city and conduct of our lives with the hope of Christ.