

Twelve Angry Men, by Reginald Rose

"At the mouth of two witnesses, or three witnesses, shall he that is worthy of death be put to death; but at the mouth of one witness he shall not be put to death." Deuteronomy 17:6

Today, we can use DNA traces, fingerprints, or video footage as sorts of “witnesses” to prove crimes, but without such scientific discoveries, eye witnesses were one of the only ways a crime could have been proven back in Biblical times. How difficult would it be if the only possible witnesses were a direct eye witness? At least two people would have had to watch robberies, murders, and many more crimes as they happened that are difficult to catch in the act. At first glance, it might seem that God, the Judge of the earth, made it very difficult to execute justice in Biblical times. However, while it might have been hard to convict a guilty person, it would also be hard to convict an innocent person. God is also a God of mercy, and by requiring such a strong witness for conviction, He ensured safety to those who might have simply been “at the wrong place at the wrong time.”

The American presumption of “Innocent until proven guilty” is a Biblical model. Our legal system takes this presumption so seriously that the prosecution, not the defendant, bears the burden of proof. The defendant does not have to open his mouth in his defense, but the prosecution must provide strong evidence to convict. William Blackstone, a man whose insight shaped much of America’s legal system, is commonly credited with saying “it is better for ten guilty men to go free than to convict one innocent man.”

In spite of the safeguards against a wrong conviction, weak evidence is still often used to convict. (Proverbs 17:23) But God tells us not to be surprised when the wicked are unjust. (Eccl. 5:8). At one point, all the members of the legal system were regular citizens making the same everyday choices we make in our daily routines. A wrong decision made in the courtroom is no different than what they had conditioned themselves to do through seemingly trivial choices during their entire lives.

Whether in our dealings in the marketplace, raising our families, or in education and politics, we must conduct ourselves according to Scriptural equity. This makes us sorts of everyday judges that Psalm 2 speaks about. It is up to God's people to preserve justice and equity. (Proverbs 21:25). That is the only way we can eliminate ‘perverted judgment’ – through patience and practice.

INTERMISSION

The first message of Twelve Angry Men is the celebration of our American legal system, founded upon a Biblical legal approach. But the second message tells about how easily men can pervert judgment even with the strictest guidelines. Emotions, past demons, and besetting sins can all play parts in skewing judgment. Not only can those things skew judgment, they can frustrate the very desire to see clearly. It’s one thing to be confused, but it is another not to care what the correct answer might be.

The Psalmist’s prayer in 119:18 is that God would open his eyes to behold God's law. Similarly, Proverbs 16:3 tells us to ‘commit our works to the Lord’ - or obey - so that our thoughts – or our mental faculties – are grounded. Both prayer and action help keep us thinking God’s thoughts after Him. But merely desiring to execute just judgment is not enough. We must humble ourselves enough first to ask that God show us our errors and open our understanding to

whatever He might reveal. Until we take the beams out of our own eyes, we can't see clearly to take the specks out of others' eyes. This is a daily battle of sanctification, through which we know a little more of who God is and what He wants us to be.

Proverbs 23:23 "Buy the truth, and sell it not: also wisdom, and instruction, and understanding."