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God is not Mocked — Bernard Madoff and the Limitations of Human Justice

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According to media reports, Bernard L. Madoff is expected to plead guilty to eleven felony charges when he appears today in a Manhattan federal court. Madoff, whose massive Ponzi scheme led to a multi-billion dollar financial collapse, will now be counted among the most infamous of criminal investors. All told, his plea agreement with federal prosecutors is expected to result in a virtual life sentence.



Sources close to the prosecution indicated that a deal with Madoff would produce his guilty pleas, saving the government millions of dollars in prosecution costs. In this case, the plea agreement is little more than a case of the defendant throwing himself on the mercy of the court. Mercy is likely to be scarce, however, and Madoff is expected to receive a prison term of 150 years, along with financial penalties.

Madoff's investment fraud is far-reaching in its impact, representing a catastrophe for investors scattered all over the world. Nevertheless, a disproportionate share of the victims is found among New York's Jewish elite, where investing with Madoff had been seen as an enviable opportunity to reap above-average returns on investments.

One of the most famous of Bernard Madoff's victims was Nobel laureate and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, who has devoted so much of his literary work to the search for justice on earth.

There will no doubt be some satisfaction for the victims when Bernard Madoff is heard admitting guilt in his own voice. Justice is served when a guilty party admits to the guilt and accepts the rightful sentence. But this service to justice does not achieve justice. Those who lost everything they had to Madoff's scheme will hardly be satisfied to see him led off to a life sentence. After all, they must go back to rebuild their lives. The money is gone. There is no fund for restitution that can make these investors whole again. This entire society was wounded by his crimes.

Some, advanced in years, lost millions. Wealthy investors are now virtually impoverished. Retirees who had expected to live well off of their Madoff-managed funds are now trying to put their lives back together.

According to *Portfolio* magazine, Elie Wiesel lost \$22 million of his personal funds. His charity lost another \$15 million. Once poor, Wiesel had become rich. Now he is no longer rich.

Wiesel will be among those who are dissatisfied at the justice served upon Madoff by the federal court. As he told *Portfolio*, he has his own idea of an appropriate sentence for Madoff: "I would like him to be in a solitary cell with a screen. . . . On that screen, there should be pictures of his victims, one after another after another." "Psychopath' is too nice a word for him," Wiesel lamented.

Whatever the outcome of today's hearing, Bernard Madoff will never in his earthly life receive the justice that is his

rightful due. Nor will his victims receive the consolation of full and adequate justice. Madoff could serve a hundred life sentences and his victims remain just as broken and devastated as they are now.

The case of Bernard Madoff is a reminder that human justice, so important to civilization and our moral order, is a woefully inadequate justice. Our courts can go only so far, and can exact only a limited approximation of true justice.

True justice requires full payment of an adequate penalty, and no penalty is truly adequate when the full weight of human evil is honestly faced. True justice requires the restoration of the victim to the state before the injury, but no human court, however admirable, can bring a murder victim back to life, cleanse the rape victim of her memory, or restore the ability to walk to one injured by a drunk driver.

Humans are invested with a grave responsibility to seek and to serve justice. Made in God's own image, our souls cry out for justice, but justice is never fully achieved by any human court, justice system, or judge.

True justice is achieved only by the only one who is truly just and all powerful, whose verdicts are perfect and whose judgments are eternal. Human justice points to the need for a greater justice. The very inadequacy of human courts points to our yearning for a heavenly court.

We yearn for the end of history, when God will bring His creation to a perfect end; when God's redemptive purposes will be known to all; when justice flows like a mighty river. On that day justice will be perfect, and the righteous Judge will be none other than Jesus Christ, who paid the only adequate penalty for sin. On that day, God will judge both the quick and the dead, and his judgment upon the sheep and the goats will be both holy and just.

Martin Luther King, Jr. once famously stated that "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." Our only assurance that this is so is the assurance that God will surely judge — and judge perfectly. On that day, His righteousness will be on full display. For believers in Christ, every eye will be dry and every tear will be wiped away. The lame will leap and the blind will see. The dead will rise from their graves.

When Bernard Madoff stands to plead guilty to his crimes in today's hearing, justice will be served, but not achieved. The victims will be only partially — *very* partially - satisfied. Yet, be not dismayed. Justice *is* coming and our yearning for true justice will be fully satisfied in Christ. God is not mocked.

