

WHAT IS JUSTICE? (OT: Mic 6:6-8; NT: John 7:37-52)

INTRODUCTION

As a parent, there are a few things you don't need to teach your kids to say. When they don't like something, they shout: *No!* When they want something, they yell: *Mine!* Then later, when they sense some sort of injustice, they cry: *That's not fair!* Ever since we were wee, we've all had an innate sense of justice. But sometimes, as we grow old, that sense of justice dulls. Not because we don't care, but, perhaps, because life just gets full.

We're certainly living in a cultural moment that talks a lot about justice... In our context, the conversation centers mainly on race, gender, and, more broadly, power. How have powerful whites oppressed minorities? How have powerful men oppressed women? And what should be done about it? Opinions – on the nature of the problem and the potential solutions – vary wildly. We live in polarized times, where the only thing you can be sure of is that someone is upset.

Transition: But how should Christians think about justice? The answer is *biblically*. We don't take our cues from social media, cable news, or our political party. Instead, we examine what God has to say. Then we orient our lives around it, come what may. This is the discipleship challenge of our generation. And it impacts all the generations in our church.

- 84% of 18-29 yr-olds are on social media,¹ consuming on average 3 hrs 1 min every day.²
- Just under two-thirds of those over 65 get their news from cable TV.

Dear ones: **Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind (Rom 12:2).**

Let's do that today by asking three questions of this book. Biblically understood: 1) What is Justice? 2) Why Do We Care About It? and 3) How do we pursue it?

1. WHAT IS JUSTICE?

The Bible devotes over 2,000 verses to the topic of justice, which means the Bible talks about justice more than it talks about heaven, prayer, and sex – combined!³

At its simplest level, justice can be described as *setting things right*.⁴ Something is wrong/not as it should be, and justice is served when these wrongs are set right. Last week we thought about suffering – all those things that are not the way they're meant to be. The pursuit of justice is part of our response. Christians are to respond to all that is wrong by setting things right.

In the Bible, this process of *setting things right* has at least two different emphases:

- **First**, justice involves *retribution* – the punishment of wrongdoing. **2 Thess 1:6: God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you.** Perhaps this is what we typically think of when we hear the word “justice” – the punitive side that plays out in courtrooms. When someone does what is evil – lie, cheat, steal, kill, rape, abuse – they should be punished for it.
- But **second**, when the Bible talks about justice, it is more often concerned about *restoration* – providing people with the dignity they deserve as image-bearers of God.

When people are mistreated, what has been taken from them – money, opportunities, dignity – should be restored.

That's why, in the Bible, justice is so often associated with the vulnerable – with widows, orphans, immigrants, and the poor – as they're the ones who've most often been deprived.

- **Zec 7:9-10:** This is what the LORD Almighty says: Administer true justice, show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the immigrant or the poor.
- **Eze 18:5,7:** If a man is righteous and does what is just and right... [he] does not oppress anyone, but restores to the debtor his pledge, commits no robbery, gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with a garment.

This **combination** – retribution/restoration, punishment/provision – leads Tim Keller to define biblical justice this way: “[Justice] is giving people what they are due, whether punishment or protection or care.”⁵ In our world, justice could mean **retribution** – prosecuting men who've abused women. Or it could mean **restoration** – providing food for a single mom.

Summary: What is justice? Setting things right. *Giving people what they are due, whether punishment or protection or care.*

2. WHY DO WE CARE ABOUT JUSTICE?

Does this seem like a strange question? Surely justice is one of those things everyone cares about? I guess we do, but often in a vague way. I hope a more robust answer to this question – Why do we care about justice? – will elevate the importance of justice in our lives. Let's look at three biblical reasons that compel us to care about justice.

1) **The Heart of God** → When we miss justice, we miss the heart of God.

When God created our world, nothing was wrong, all was right. No one beat their wife, or lied to their friends, or stole from their office. Children had parents, parents had homes, everyone had enough to eat. God called it **good**, and then he called it **very good**. So, imagine the heartbreak when sin entered the world and with sin – all that is wrong.

Injustice is not part of God's plan for the world – he hates it. **Isa 61:8:** For I the LORD love justice; I hate robbery and wrong. He even introduces himself as the **father of the fatherless and protector of widows (Ps 68:5)**. Isn't that significant? My bio says that I'm husband to Rosie, father to my kids, and pastor of this beautiful church. I introduce myself by telling you about the things that are the most important to my heart. Here's part of God's bio – **Dt 10:18:** He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing. He's telling us about the things that are the most important to his heart. God is passionately concerned justice for the vulnerable.⁶

Mark Labberton – recently retired President at Fuller Theological Seminary – wrote: “We should not fool ourselves into thinking that it is enough to feel drawn to the heart of God without our lives showing the heart of God.”⁷ When we miss justice, we miss the heart of God.

2) **The Heart of the Gospel** → When we miss justice, we miss the heart of the gospel.

Some in the church feel wary when justice is emphasized as central to our faith. Such concern is understandable: In the twentieth century, many liberal churches abandoned the Bible's teaching on salvation through Jesus in favor of what became known as the “Social Gospel.” What

mattered most was no longer what Jesus has done for you, but what you are doing for your neighbor – salvation comes not by grace but by our acts of justice. We want to be aware of these concerns, but we don't want the pendulum to swing to the equal but opposite error – where we end up neglecting the importance of justice.

In fact, keeping Christ and his cross at the center of our faith, serves to deepen our concern for justice. Don't forget the heart of the gospel: the gifts of forgiveness and grace were delivered to us *by* and *through* an act of justice. On the cross Jesus:

- Jesus took the punishment our sin deserves – **retribution** has occurred.
- That we might be brought back into relationship with him – that we might be **restored**.

We were spiritual widows and orphans, immigrants without a heavenly home, desperately poor in the sight of God. But we have received grace, because at the cross justice has been served. See how he loves you? There is a God in heaven, and his heart towards you is love.

When we understand this gospel, it necessarily makes us passionate about justice. The more you grasp how God has met all your needs, the more you will seek to meet the needs of others. Nothing reveals your heart toward Jesus, whom you have not seen, as much as your heart towards those whom you see right now.

Think of **Matthew 25**: When someone is **hungry** and you give them food, when they are **thirsty** and you give them drink, when they are a **stranger** and you welcome them in, when they are **naked** and you clothe them, when they are **sick** and you visit them, when they are in **prison** and you come to them... The King says: **Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me (V40).**

Summary: The justice of the cross makes us a people of justice. When we miss justice, we miss the heart of the gospel.

3) The Heart of the Church → When we miss justice, we miss the heart of the church. Larry Hurtado – who was a NT scholar at *The University of Edinburgh* – wrote one of my favorite books called *Destroyer of the Gods*. In it he explains how unusual the church was in those early years after Jesus's resurrection.

Part of Christians' distinctiveness did come from their beliefs. For example:

- Xns refused to worship the other gods commonly worshipped in the Roman world.
- Xns were ridiculed for believing God cares about – even loves – people here on earth.

But beyond their beliefs, Christians were viewed as bizarre – even dangerous – for living as they did. For example:

- It seemed strange that Xns embraced different **races/ethnicities** as brothers/sisters in the faith.
- In an age where **unwanted babies** (usually girls) were literally thrown on trash heaps and left to die, it made no sense to see Xns gather these wee ones up and raise them – not to sell as slaves but to look after them as their own.
- At a time when it was common – whether married or not – to have **sex** with multiple partners, the purity of Xns seemed excessive.

- In their **hierarchical society**, Xns were ridiculed for giving equal honor to men/women, parents/children, masters/slaves.

The social behavior of Christians – racial reconciliation, the sanctity of life, sexual ethics, the inherent dignity of all people – was profoundly counter-cultural. Their approach to justice distinguished them from the world around.

Since the beginning, justice has been at the heart of the church. We are not saved *by* what we do, but we are saved *to do* – that’s how we become Christ’s body to this broken world. We are the ones through whom his kingdom comes. We are the ones through whom he’s righting all wrongs. We are the ones through whom justice is done. When we miss justice, we miss the heart of the church.

Transition: But let’s not miss it...

- Let’s be those people who show the world the heart of our God, the heart of our gospel, and the heart of our church by pursuing justice on this earth.
- What might that look like in your life? How do we pursue it? Let me share two thoughts.

3. HOW DO WE PURSUE JUSTICE?

1) Let me invite you to start right where you are...

- **At Home:**
 - Treat those you live with kindly. Apologize when you’re wrong. Make your home – with roommates/family – a haven where God’s will is done.
 - Parents: Disciple your children to know God’s standards for right/wrong. Teach them to love justice, and to give their lives to something better than the American Dream → *Start where you are.*
- **At Work:**
 - Have the highest ethical standards. Be honest with your customers and treat your employees well.
 - Consider how your work can be profitable, but also be a blessing to the community as well → *Start where you are.*
- **In Your Community:**
 - Look out for those in need.
 - Stand up for a classmate who’s being bullied. Bring a meal to a single mom. Support refugees in our city by volunteering at ELL → *Start where you are.*

2) Then, having started where you are, consider adding one more thing...

- The scale of injustice in our world means there’s always more to do → And there’s certainly far more than can be done by any individual – by me or you.
- But I think that’s why God makes each of us particularly passionate about different things.
 - Think of the issues we described in the early church: We should all care about **racial justice**. We should all care about the **unborn**. We should all care about **sexual exploitation**. We should all care that everyone is treated with equal **dignity/respect**.
 - And we could add other issues as well.
 - We should all care about widows/orphans/immigrants/poor.

- We should all care about the homeless in our city, those struggling with their mental health, children in foster care.
 - But while we should all care about it all, God hasn't called YOU to fix it all.
 - **But he is calling you to do something.**
 - **Start where you are... then do something.**
- Which of these things has God put on *your* heart? Which one do *you* feel passionate about? Which one makes *you* feel that something must be done?
 - Take the issue YOU care about and **do something**...
 - Start to pray about it...
 - Learn more here at church:
 - If **racial justice** – come to CRE that starts next week.
 - If **special needs** – Invite people you know with disabilities to our church. Tell them we are a church that wants and needs them here. Then reach out to Mary Kendall to see how you can help.
 - If **foster care** – Come to interest meeting on May 16. Hosting a Fostering 101 class that will answer questions/give you next steps.
 - Or get out into the community to join those who are already at work:
 - We support ministries that work with every issue imaginable.
 - Reach out to KA if there's something you'd like info about.
- We do need to count the cost...
 - Getting involved in justice isn't easy → Can be awkward/hard → Require you to sacrifice time/money/comfort.
 - But back we go to Jesus and find that he is enough → His loving sacrifice fuels us to give whatever he asks you to give up.

We can't all do everything, but we'll make a tremendous difference if we all do something.

CONCLUSION

- In *The Magician's Nephew*, C. S. Lewis describes the creation of Narnia: "*One moment there had been nothing but darkness; next moment a thousand, thousand points of light leapt out – single stars, constellations, and planets, brighter and bigger than any in our world.*"⁸
- Isn't that a beautiful picture of what Christians can be:
 - *A thousand, thousand points of light*... → Lighting up our dark world.
 - Each playing a small role, but together, making a big difference in our world.
 - Secure in the love of God, go out and set things right...
 - Show the world the heart of our God, the heart of our gospel, and the heart of our church.
- We don't need to teach our kids to cry out for justice → But maybe you and I need to grow a little younger – to be as passionate about justice as our kids.
 - **Secure in the love of God – Start where you are... then do something.**

RESOURCES AND ENDNOTES

Resources

This list contains some of the resources that were used to prepare this sermon series. Check them out if you want to dig a little deeper.

- F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?*
- L. Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World.*
- T. Keller, *The Reason for God.*
- T. Keller, *Generous Justice.*
- Mark Labberton, *The Dangerous Act of Worship: Living God's Call to Justice.*
- C. S. Lewis, *The Magician's Nephew.*
- Logos Bible Software.
- J. McDowell, *More Than a Carpenter and A Ready Defense.*
- D. Plotz, *Good Book: The Bizarre, Hilarious, Disturbing, Marvelous, and Inspiring Things I Learned When I Read Every Single Word of the Bible.*
- C. Sanders, *Introduction to Research in English Literary History.*
- F. Schaeffer, *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?*
- E. Shillito, *Jesus of the Scars.*
- L. Strobel, *The Case for Christ.*
- R. Wilbourne, *Seek Justice.*

Endnotes

¹ <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/social-media/>

² <https://review42.com/resources/how-much-time-do-people-spend-on-social-media/>

³ See Rankin Wilbourne's sermon, *Seek Justice*, accessed [here](#) on 1/4/18.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ See Tim Keller, *Generous Justice*, 4.

⁶ I owe this illustration to Keller, 6.

⁷ Mark Labberton, *The Dangerous Act of Worship: Living God's Call to Justice*, 38.

⁸ C. S. Lewis, *The Magician's Nephew*, 117.