



DO JUSTICE. LOVE MERCY.
ISA. 58 1-10 | MT. 25:31-46

Bible Project Justice Video. Last year we got together as elder and asked what do we need to address in 2019? And justice was one of them. And this is such a difficult topic not because it's unclear in Scripture, but because it's so politicized. Even words like justice or immigrant are so charged with political meaning that it's made it nearly impossible to think about them through an exclusively biblical lens. And as I've studied this week, I've become more and more convinced that we've allowed Fox News and CNN to shape our ideas about justice than we have the Bible. And so we are going to do a four week mini series on justice and ask the question what does it look like for us to live justly in our society.

Now before we dive into the topic of justice I want to make one crucial clarification at the very beginning. And it may sound like a strange caveat to make but it is crucial. At the outset, we need to realize that the primary mission of the church—the institutional church—is preaching the gospel and making disciples, not social justice. There are folks who would say that churches should primarily be concerned with ending poverty, planting trees, and prison reform and variety of other issues. And while those things are important, they are not the primary mission of the church. Truth is other organizations can do those things much better than the church can. The church's job is to preach the Gospel and make disciples.

But any church that is discipling its people is showing them what Jesus taught about how to love people and live justly in society. So while the church's job is fairly narrow in preaching the Gospel and making disciples, if it's doing this correctly it will constantly be sending Christian individuals out into the world to be agents of change. For example, it's not the New Century's job to love your neighbor, it's your job, but it is New Century's job to show you what love for neighbor looks like. What protecting the weak looks like. And so that's our goal—how can I help equip you to go out into the world as lights for Christ as you both share with your words and show with your actions his amazing love. **Pray.**

The word justice in the Bible can refer to a variety of things. It often refers to a fair verdict in a legal sense. It can refer to punishment for wrongdoing. But the words justice and righteousness are also regularly used to describe how we should relate to those around us and particularly the most vulnerable.

“7 who executes justice for the oppressed, who gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets the prisoners free; 8 the Lord opens the eyes of the blind. The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the righteous.9 The Lord watches over the sojourners; he upholds the widow and the fatherless, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.” (Psalm 146:7-9) It's not hard at all to understand why the God of the Bible is so attractive to the weak and needy.

He cares about everyone and shows compassion to the marginalized and the least of these—the people that others don't care about and don't like. Keller says it like this (paraphrase) “In a society where men are at the top, God says I stand for the widow and plead her case. In a society where family was the most meaningful relationship in society—I stand with the orphan. In a society where everyone is trying to get

ahead—I stand with the needy and poor. In a society where everyone grabs for power, identify those who are oppressed by it.” And not only does he do those things but he has created a people and tasked them with doing the same. In other words, caring for the least of these isn’t just God’s job. He’s created a people for his glory and entrusted them with enacting that same justice and compassion. Melissa read from Isa. 58 a few moments ago and gave you a peak into what we mean when we say mercy and justice.

“Cry aloud; do not hold back; lift up your voice like a trumpet; declare to my people their transgression, to the house of Jacob their sins. ² Yet they seek me daily and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that did righteousness and did not forsake the judgment of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments; they delight to draw near to God. ³ ‘Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?’” (Isa. 58:1-3)

They’ve been doing religious actions but have neglected those around them. They are oppressing their workers (vs3)—they’re being bad employers. “Is not this the fast that I choose to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed^[a] go free, and to break every yoke? ⁷ Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?” (vss. 6-7)... vs 9 Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry, and he will say, ‘Here I am.’ If you take away the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness, ¹⁰ if you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday.”

They are doing the motions of religion but neglecting the very heart of God-honoring love. And what he’s saying if you aren’t sharing your bread and clothing the naked you prove that you’re not close to me—because I stand with them. Lest anyone think this is an ethic in the OT:

Mt. 25:31-46 “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. ³² Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. ³⁴ Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? ³⁸ And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? ³⁹ And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ ⁴⁰ And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers—believers—^[a] you did it to me.’ “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. ⁴² For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ ⁴⁴ Then they also will answer, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?’ ⁴⁵ Then he will answer them, saying, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ ⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

Now you could easily make the mistake of thinking that this text is teaching that we’re saved by how much we help people; by how much mercy and justice ministry we do. And that would be a huge mistake. We see over and over again in Scripture that we’re saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

And that no amount of good works, or caring the poor, could ever earn God's approval or love. And in fact any attempt to earn God's love by works is actually sin that needs to be repented of. But if text isn't teaching salvation by mercy and justice ministry what's it teaching?

It's simply this: genuine salvation will necessarily overflow in loving mercy and doing justice. It's never the basis of anyone's salvation but it should be the fruit of everyone's salvation. Please do not make the mistake of thinking this is a political issue or even worse that a text like this is a liberal text. Jesus so cares about the hungry and poor and stranger and so identifies with them that he's saying to not love them is to not love him. At one point this would be offensive to me—shouldn't we just preach the Gospel? Yes—our words announce the Gospel but our works adorn the Gospel. It's been a blind spot for me. And if this issue and these people are so dear to the Lord Jesus, then friends they must be dear to us. Dreaded this series, in a sense because it reveals holes in my spirituality.

3 Characteristics of Just Living

Impartial Treatment of All People

Simply put, living justly means not being prejudiced or discriminating against certain types of people in the way that you treat them.

At the very core of the Bible's teaching about justice is the idea that everyone whether it's Adolf Hitler or Mother Teresa is made in the image of God. This serves as the entire basis for human rights. That people have dignity and worth and value intrinsically—a worth and value they don't have to earn but they have by nature of being human—by being made in the *imago Dei*. And as those created to to reflect his glory and extend his reign they are to be treated with equal dignity and to be prejudiced against one kind of person or another is unjust. It's not just rude. “My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. 2 For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, 3 PAUSE and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, “You sit here in a good place,” while you say to the poor man, “You stand over there,” or, “Sit down at my feet,” 4 have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? 5 Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him? 6 But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court?” (Jas 2:1-6)

Treating people as you would treat yourself. Not being prejudiced. The millionaire and the homeless person stand on equal ground at the foot of the cross. Not because they've worked as hard, or are as intelligent but simply because they're made in the image of God and both deserving dignified respectful treatment.

Special Concern For The Vulnerable

In addition to treating all people with dignity, the Bible calls to show unique concern for some groups of people. Part of living justly is showing unique concern for the people in our society who are the most vulnerable. And over and over again we see 4 groups of people come up. Orphans, widows, immigrants, poor people. “7 who executes justice for the oppressed, who gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets the prisoners free; 8 the Lord opens the eyes of the blind. The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the righteous.9 The Lord watches over the sojourners; he upholds the widow and the fatherless, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.” (Psalm 146:7-9)

“Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.” (Js. 1:27)

This phrase “orphans and widows” includes the weak in general; disabled, the elderly, sex trafficking victim and we’re called to show them unique concern and care. Anger problem.

Living justly means living with a posture of concern and willingness to stand with and help the powerless—the people who are most vulnerable to being overlooked, exploited, or mistreated. Which leads to the third characteristic of just living...

Being A Voice For The Voiceless

“Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute. Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.” (Prov. 31:8-9)

What we learn here is that part of living justly is not just keeping yourself from practicing injustice speaking up for those who are suffering injustice; part of just living is advocating for the destitute defending the rights of the poor and needy. Advocating for the vulnerable and oppressed. I think of Martin Luther King writing his Letter from the Birmingham jail in 1963.

“It may well be that we will have to repent in this generation. Not merely for the vitriolic words and the violent actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence and indifference of the good people who sit around and say, “Wait on time.”

Speaking up for the vulnerable and oppressed and weak is part of what it means to do justice and love mercy. So these are three characteristics of living righteously towards others. Impartial, special concern for vulnerable, voice for the voiceless.

And this is really where we have to turn the corner and talk about what is living justly really going to mean for us on the ground level. And I think at a fundamental level, it means making other people’s problems our problems. I’m not saying this in some unqualified kind of way—we’re not saying you should help everyone everywhere all the time (1) Can’t help everyone (2) Can’t enable people (3) Not everyone is equally deserving of help—those who don’t work don’t eat (2 Thess. 3:10) So when we talk about making others people’s problems our problems it’s not in some universal unqualified sense and I’m not even trying to give details about what this look like in your life. There is not specific prescription here for what you’re going to do (serve at mission, volunteer with folks). My goal is a posture toward justice and mercy I want to get at the heart of what hinders our efforts at doing justice and mercy.

I want to shield myself from everyone’s problems. I want to guard myself from being slowed down by anyone else’s needs or brokenness and that’s what I think needs to be addressed. That’s what needs to change. It’s a heart issue. “Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need.” (Eph. 4:28)

I shouldn’t have to be inconvenienced by anyone else’s neediness. I shouldn’t have to clothe the naked, feed the hungry, do these things but friends Jesus says to the degree you did or didn’t do these things for your brothers and sisters, you did or didn’t do these things for me.

So I’ve thought about “What it’s going to take for us to be more oriented toward justice and mercy.”

Steps to Living Justly

Realize that the vulnerable are among us.

Are you aware that Roanoke in the 98th percentile, for single mother, upward economic mobility, economic segregation, refugee resettlement city? Does anything in your life reflect that you are aware of that. I can ask it differently, if none of those things were true, were your life look any different? We are a wonderful city for mercy and justice ministries.

Commit to seeing people as God sees them.

Our culture places value on people in ways that are completely contrary to Scripture. We value people for their looks, strength, intelligence, professional success, and how much they might contribute to us. Which means we tend to devalue the vulnerable and marginalized. Mt. 5 Blessed are the poor in Spirit, those who mourn, the meek, hunger and thirst for righteousness, merciful, pure in heart, peace makers, persecuted because of righteousness. Is this the lens through which we see people? Because if it's not, then we run the risk of avoiding for convenience sake the people who God has blessed and stands with. There is a sense in which everyone's story is different, but if you've trusted Christ there is a real sense in which all of our stories are the same. One problem. One rescuer. One Hope. One glorious future. And until we see the vulnerable, the poor, the orphan the immigrant among us in that way we'll be reluctant to come along side them and move into their brokenness.

Realize that God has made our problem his problem.

Telling people what to do doesn't give them the power to do it. We need something else.

“If your brother, a Hebrew man or a Hebrew woman, is sold^[a] to you, he shall serve you six years, and in the seventh year you shall let him go free from you. ¹³ And when you let him go free from you, you shall not let him go empty-handed. ¹⁴ You shall furnish him liberally out of your flock, out of your threshing floor, and out of your winepress. As the LORD your God has blessed you, you shall give to him. ¹⁵ You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God redeemed you; therefore I command you this today.” What is the logic here? I made your problem my problem. You should be generous to that slave because you were a slave and I redeemed you. I gave you abundance and blessing—not to hoard it but it turn around and give it to others.

“You shall not pervert the justice due to the sojourner or to the fatherless, or take a widow's garment in pledge, but you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this.” (Deut. 24:17-18) Same logic.

In the same way. Jesus came and made your problem his problem. He saw us in our sin. He saw us in our shame and guilt and chose to leave heaven and do something about it. He came and was oppressed, was poor, was mocked and mistreated. Jesus loved widows and the lame prostitutes, tax collectors, Romans Samaritans—and he's nailed to a tree and absorbs the wrath that we deserved. So that we could have the righteousness that only he deserves. And when you realize that it changes you.

When you ponder the wonder of Christ making your problem his problem—your compelled to do the same. When you see that you've been rescued it compels you to extend rescue. *First in sharing the Gospel*—but also in meeting physical needs.

Maybe you're trying to be rescued by rescuing others—it won't work.

Maybe you think extending rescue to others doesn't matter.

* One of the reasons we're reluctant to invest in the vulnerable and needy is because we feel like everything we have is the result of our own strength and effort. It's way easier to share when something's been given to us. And that you should only be able to enjoy what you earn. What about the poor in Roanoke? Are they just lazier? There are other factors in play besides hard work (Deut. 8:17-18) ¹⁷ You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me." ¹⁸ But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your ancestors, as it is today."

Paul is so blunt to say, "For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?" (1 Cor. 4:7)

And if you don't realize this, you'll never share your stuff. Kids getting stuff to share. It's to share. As people who have been given everything and who are going to inherit the world, Christians should be the most generous people on the planet.