

This fall, I am preaching a sermon series I have entitled “Justice,” looking at what the Bible has to say about justice and how to evaluate the cultural messages on justice that are all around us. Each week, I have begun with three preliminary comments. First of all, this is not primarily a political sermon series or a social science lecture series. I will be trying to stay in my lane as a pastor, helping our church to know Jesus and to better love Him and love your neighbor. Secondly, I recognize that I will be addressing some sensitive subjects, and I do not expect everyone to agree with every word I speak. I do expect, however, that we will model speaking the truth in love. If you disagree with me on something I say, or have other insights or experience that you feel would enhance my understanding or my teaching, or if something I say does not sit well with you, please speak up. Consider this an invitation to a conversation. And thirdly, my goal in this series is not to help us wag our finger at the world for acting like the world, but to challenge the church to do better in the realm of justice.

This morning is my last sermon in this series. Next week will be a time of summary and testimony, where you will have the opportunity to share reflections on what you learned or what God did in your life during this series. This morning, I want to preach on the end of injustice. I want to begin with a particularly depressing passage from Ecclesiastes 4:1-3 that I’m pretty certain is nobody’s life verse:

Ecclesiastes 4:1-3 - Again I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under the sun: I saw the tears of the oppressed-- and they have no comforter; power was on the side of their oppressors-- and they have no comforter. ² And I declared that the dead, who had already died, are happier than the living, who are still alive. ³ But better than both is he who has not yet been, who has not seen the evil that is done under the sun.

If you live long enough on this earth with your eyes open and you will be overwhelmed by the amount of injustice in this world. **Poverty**, lack of clean drinking water, children in the foster care system, economic inequalities, racism, sexism, natural disasters, war, terrorism, human trafficking, healthcare inequalities, homelessness, and on and on it goes. Even if you have the biggest heart for justice, it seems clear that you can’t do away with injustice in this world, no matter how hard you try, that you may find that you give your life to the cause, only to find that you have only made the tiniest dent in the problem. But the good news is that the Bible teaches us that one day, God will make a final end to all injustice and suffering.

Revelation 21:1-5 – *Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. ² I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴ He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” ⁵ He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”*

In the end, there will a final judgment, and all that is evil and unjust will be destroyed, and God will dwell with us forever in the renewed heaven and earth. This really matters in the fight against injustice, more than you possibly know. Certainly there are some who think that believing in a heaven where everything is put right would lead to apathy on the earth, that it is those who believe that this world is all there is who would give themselves to improving this world. But this is not the case. Let me give three reasons why our belief in life after death is so critical to fighting injustice:

1) Everything we do matters eternally

One of the real crises of life without God is the question of whether it will make a difference in the end. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul talks about the importance of Jesus’ resurrection, and the reality that death is not the end, that all who trust in Jesus will also be raised from the dead. He concludes the chapter with these crucial words:

1 Corinthians 15:58 – *Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.*

Because of the resurrection, everything we do matters eternally. None of it is in vain. If there is no life after death, then in the end you will be dead, and the world will be destroyed, and it won’t matter whether you worked for justice or lived for your own pleasure and happiness. This is why those who are so often passionate about justice in their younger years settle into becoming suburb-living consumers as they grow up. The hippies become yuppies. But if there is life after death, then everything we do matters eternally. As Jesus put it:

Matthew 10:42 - *And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward."*

It all matters eternally. I don't know what the reward is, but perhaps part of the reward is seeing that our efforts to give and love and work for justice will in the end be satisfied, as we dwell forever in a world where the very fabric of reality is love and justice. Everything we do for the Lord, for His kingdom, is a foretaste of what life in the kingdom will be like. Even though there is suffering and oppression all around, and even though it will never be done away with this side of eternity, God has called you, the church, to do justice and love mercy.

Colossians 1:24 - *Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church.*

You can't do everything. What can you do? Take responsibility. Give your life to a cause worth living for. Become broken bread and poured out wine. Remember the truth of the gospel:

Ephesians 2:8-10 - *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast.¹⁰ For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*

You are saved by grace for good works. As God puts His Holy Spirit in you, He gifts and empowers you to make an eternal difference in this world. Love your neighbor. Love your family. Work for justice. Pray for revival and for the salvation of others. The challenge is big. Let this prayer of St. Francis of Assisi be your prayer:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let me sow love.

Where there is injury, pardon.

Where there is doubt, faith.

Where there is despair, hope.

Where there is darkness, light.

Where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master,

grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled, as to console;

*to be understood, as to understand;
to be loved, as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive.
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.
Amen.*

2) Suffering is not meaningless

If this world is all there is, then there is very little redemptive about suffering. If there is no life after death, then suffering is to be avoided at all cost, because it interrupts our life. If we are living for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, then suffering is the enemy, because it robs us of life, it stifles our liberty, and it steals our happiness. If there is no afterlife, then if you can't find happiness in this life, you're lost. If you got dealt a bad hand and grew up in poverty, in a broken home, with mental or physical illness, then what is good about this life? But if there is more to life than life under the sun, then suffering and evil can be useful. If the goal in life is not to maximize my temporal happiness, but to know God, to enjoy and worship Him, and to be like Him, then suffering is not meaningless. As Tim Keller put it:

“If your ultimate love and joy is found in the treasures of this world, then suffering will rob you of your joy and make you sadder and madder. But if your ultimate love and joy is found in God, then suffering will drive you deeper into the source of that joy.”

If you are living for anything other than God, if your goal is anything else – your looks, image, reputation, success, relationships, health - then suffering will be that much more painful, because it is stealing from you the purpose of your life. But if life after death is real, if one day God will put a final end to injustice and suffering, then suffering is not meaningless. It will accompany a life of meaning and responsibility as we serve God, love our neighbor, and work for justice. As Paul put it:

Philippians 3:10-11 - *I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.*

Even what we see as injustice can be redemptive and meaningful in God's hands and in His plan. Pastor-theologian William Willimon tells the story of visiting a

woman in his church in the hospital, after she had just given birth. The doctor had told them there were problems with the birth, Down Syndrome, and also a minor and correctible respiratory condition. The doctor said, “My recommendation is for you to consider just letting nature take its course, and then in a few days there shouldn’t be a problem.” In other words, the child will die naturally if you leave things as they are. Raising a Down syndrome child will create enormous amounts of stress, and studies showed that many parents of Down syndrome children divorced or separated. Is it fair of you to bring this sort of suffering upon your other two children?

She said, “I could certainly see why it would make sense for a child like this to be born into a family like ours. Our children will do just fine. When you think about it, it could be a great opportunity.”

If this life is all there is, then yes, do all you can to avoid the possibility of pain, suffering, and injustice. But because of the resurrection, because of life after death, we know that suffering be redemptive, something that matures us, makes us more like Christ, and gives us opportunity to glorify Him?

Suffering can reveal to us our need for God, help us realize that we are not self-sufficient. It can give us a greater love for Jesus, a deeper appreciation for how much He loves us because of how much He was willing to suffer for us. It can give us the opportunity to show others how much we love them.

C.S. Lewis – *“God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain. Pain is God’s megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”*

Because there is life after death, suffering is not meaningless. God will use suffering and injustice for His glory and for our good.

3) There is forgiveness for our injustice at the cross

One of the most important truths from this sermon series is that injustice is not just a problem out there. **It is also in here, in each of our hearts.** We are all guilty of injustice, of not treating people equitably, of being biased and partial, of not loving our neighbor as ourselves. So what happens when you realize that not only are you incapable of overcoming injustice in the world, but you can’t even deal with the corruption and brokenness in your own heart?

If God is going to one day make a final end to injustice, and if our hearts are full of injustice, then what does that mean for us? It means that when God finally judges injustice on that day, we are in big trouble.

Revelation 20:11-15 - *Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. ¹² And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were **judged according to** what they had done as recorded in the books. ¹³ The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was **judged according to** what he had done. ¹⁴ Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. ¹⁵ If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.*

Judgment is real, and since we are guilty of injustice, we are in danger of eternal judgment. But there is good news. Jesus lived the perfect life we could not live, suffered and died, but overcame sin and death to offer forgiveness of sins and injustice for all who turn from their self-centeredness and sin to put their trust in Him.

John 3:16-18 – *“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.”*

On that cross, Jesus dealt with our injustice, offering us forgiveness and a new heart.

Isaiah 53:3-6 - *He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. ⁴ Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. ⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. ⁶ We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*

He suffered and died for you, being forsaken by God so that you will never be. Injustice is not just a thing out there, but must be dealt with in us. Are you in Christ? It begins there, with His grace. Then we go and do justice, loving our neighbor and working for the good of others, in the power of the Holy Spirit, just as He has done for us, knowing that one day, God will make a final end of injustice.