

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. I’m going slowly through this series, trying not to take on too much at once. Each week, I begin with three preliminary comments, which I want to repeat this week. 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, as I said last week, 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 this area.

In the first week, we looked at how we are **created, designed beings**, not self-designed people. Despite the reality that our world is increasingly trying to convince us that the path to happiness is to look within, discover who we are, and then give expression to that and expect the world to affirm and applaud us, true joy and purpose is found in living according to God’s design for us. In the second week, we looked at how we have all been **created in the image of God**, and the reason that any life matters is because of that truth. In week three, we addressed the question of what is wrong with the world, and how vital it is to understand the **concept of sin** if you are going to do justice in this world. And last week, we looked at how important it is to begin with **the gospel of salvation of grace** before taking on the overwhelming work of justice, so that you do not burn out, lower the bar, or compare yourself to others.

This morning, I want to begin with a question.

What would cause the God of the universe to cover his ears when we sing worship songs? What would cause him to yell “turn down the music”? Does he not like contemporary music? Or singing off key? No. It’s something else entirely. And what would cause him to send everyone home from church? To tell us to not bother collecting an offering? Is it the way we dress? Is it where we choose to sit? No. It is something else entirely:

***Amos 5:21-24 - "I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. <sup>22</sup> Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will***

*not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. <sup>23</sup> Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. <sup>24</sup> But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!*

If you're unfamiliar with Amos, Amos was a prophet raised up by God near the end of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, before Assyria destroyed Israel in 722 BC. At Mt. Sinai, when the Israelites had come out of slavery in Egypt, God had made a covenant with Moses and the people – I will be your God, you will be my people, these are the laws governing what it means to be my people, and if you follow them, these good things will happen, and if you disobey them, these are the bad things that will happen. Prophets were covenant mediators, calling Israel to repentance when they were in danger of bringing the covenant curses on themselves. In this case, the main issues were idolatry and injustice. And in this incredible passage, God tells them that he can not stand their religious feasts and gatherings. He can't stand their worship music. And it has nothing to do with the style, but everything to do with two key features that are lacking from their society: **justice and righteousness**. Up until this point in the series, I have not really defined these two key terms. But today I want to help us understand them, particularly as they are laid out in the Old Testament. I owe a lot to Tim Keller's book *Generous Justice*:

What is justice? **Mishpat**. Treating people equitably. Mainly related to court, it means acquitting or punishing every person on the merits of the case, regardless of race or social status. Giving people what they are due and not being biased on the basis of economic status or race or gender or anything else. Or, in business, it is dealing with people fairly and equitably and not taking advantage of people. There are two main kinds of justice. The first is retributive justice – acquitting or punishing on the merits of the case.

*Leviticus 19:15 - "Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly.*

Notice that justice, Biblically speaking, means not showing partiality, whether to the poor or to the rich. Justice should be blind to any characteristics of the person.

But there is also another element of justice, and that is restorative justice, justice that establishes the rights of people. God is particularly concerned about those who do not have social standing:

**Psalm 68:4-5** - Sing to God, sing praise to his name, extol him who rides on the clouds--his name is the LORD-- and rejoice before him. <sup>5</sup> A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling.

It is incredible how often throughout the Bible we see God portrayed as the defender or advocate of four main classes of people: widows, orphans, immigrants, and the poor, all of whom had no social power in those days. God is particularly concerned that those who have little social power, those who are disenfranchised, are cared for and lifted up by His people. Today, that list could include the refugee, migrant worker, homeless, and many single parents and elderly people. The poor and the other classes mentioned are often victims of injustice, because they can not defend themselves as well as the rich and those with social power. As far as God is concerned, to neglect these people is a violation of justice. The follower of God, if he or she is trying to live like Jesus, will look for opportunities to lift people like this out of poverty or oppression.

**Micah 6:8** - He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

This is God's heart. More important than your offering, your singing, your religious devotion, or even showing up on a Sunday, is that you would do justice.

**Isaiah 58:3-11** - 'Why have we fasted,' they say, 'and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?' "Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. <sup>4</sup> Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high. <sup>5</sup> Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for a man to humble himself? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for **lying on sackcloth and ashes**? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? <sup>6</sup> "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? <sup>7</sup> Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter-- when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? <sup>8</sup> Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be **your rear guard**. <sup>9</sup> Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I. "If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, <sup>10</sup> and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night

*will become like the noonday. <sup>11</sup> The LORD will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail.*

A just society, a society that demonstrates mishpat, is one that treats those groups equitably. A just church is willing to make long-term personal sacrifices in order to serve the most vulnerable, poor, and marginalized.

We recognize that this is easier said than done. People who are poor can be poor because of natural disasters, or unjust social systems, or moral failure. Usually it's a combination of the three. And so lifting people up does not just mean throwing money at them. But it does mean being willing to enter in to helping them.

What about righteousness? **Righteousness is tzadeqah** – in the OT, this is not mainly about private morality, but is a life of right relationships. To be righteous means to be rightly related to God and right with others. Conducting relationships with fairness and generosity and equity. Righteousness is seen in how you treat others.

Righting wrongs, generosity, especially towards the poor and vulnerable. Meeting the needs of others, especially those who are disenfranchised.

Job was considered righteous. Look at how he described himself:

**Job 31:16-22** - *"If I have denied the desires of the poor or let the eyes of the widow grow weary, <sup>17</sup> if I have kept my bread to myself, not sharing it with the fatherless-- <sup>18</sup> but from my youth I reared him as would a father, and from my birth I guided the widow-- <sup>19</sup> if I have seen anyone perishing for lack of clothing, or a needy man without a garment, <sup>20</sup> and his heart did not bless me for warming him with the fleece from my sheep, <sup>21</sup> if I have raised my hand against the fatherless, knowing that I had influence in court, <sup>22</sup> then let my arm fall from the shoulder, let it be broken off at the joint.*

The righteous person treats those with lower social status fairly, lifting them up, not simply living for oneself. They are willing to disadvantage themselves in order to advantage the community. Throughout the OT were pictures of what this should look like in God's society. Think of God's provision of manna – gather enough for yourself, leave some for the rest. Hoard it and it will rot. Specific OT laws – Deut 24 - gleaning, so that the poor could be self-sufficient. Leave some grain for the poor to gather for themselves.

**Deuteronomy 24:19-22** - *When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the alien, the fatherless and the widow, so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. <sup>20</sup> When you beat the olives from your trees, do not go over the branches a second time. Leave what remains for the alien, the fatherless and the widow. <sup>21</sup> When you harvest the grapes in your vineyard, do not go over the vines again. Leave what remains for the alien, the fatherless and the widow. <sup>22</sup> Remember that you were slaves in Egypt. That is why I command you to do this.*

Think of **tithing** – every third year, tithes were put in public storehouses so that the poor, aliens, fatherless, and widows would receive them.

Think of Deuteronomy 15 – **no long-term debt**.

**Deuteronomy 15:1-5** - *At the end of every seven years you must cancel debts. <sup>2</sup> This is how it is to be done: Every creditor shall cancel the loan he has made to his fellow Israelite. He shall not require payment from his fellow Israelite or brother, because the LORD's time for canceling debts has been proclaimed. <sup>3</sup> You may require payment from a foreigner, but you must cancel any debt your brother owes you. <sup>4</sup> However, there should be no poor among you, for in the land the LORD your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you, <sup>5</sup> if only you fully obey the LORD your God and are careful to follow all these commands I am giving you today.*

Year of Jubilee – debts are forgiven and slaves are freed. Every 49<sup>th</sup> year, land goes back to original tribal and family allotments. There were measures in place to assure that there would be no long-term poverty.

**Leviticus 25:10-13** - *Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a **jubilee** for you; each one of you is to return to his family property and each to his own clan. <sup>11</sup> The fiftieth year shall be a **jubilee** for you; do not sow and do not reap what grows of itself or harvest the untended vines. <sup>12</sup> For it is a **jubilee** and is to be holy for you; eat only what is taken directly from the fields. <sup>13</sup> "In this Year of **Jubilee** everyone is to return to his own property.*

We no longer live in a theocracy. But among God's people, this is how it is to be. Again, not just throwing money at people, but helping to lift people out of poverty through however we can help them be self-sustaining, or helping to meet their

needs if they can not sustain themselves. What a witness this would be to the community, just as it was in the early church:

Emperor Julian – “Nothing has contributed to the progress of the superstition of the Christians as their charity to strangers... the impious Galileans provide not only for their own poor, but for ours as well.”

As I said last week, this mercy and compassion comes first and foremost from understanding the mercy and compassion that God has had towards us in our sinful state.

*1 Timothy 1:15-16 - Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners-- of whom I am the worst. <sup>16</sup> But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.*

As we receive His mercy, we are filled with His Holy Spirit that empowers us to love as He has loved us.

*Luke 6:31-36 - Do to others as you would have them do to you. <sup>32</sup> "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' love those who love them. <sup>33</sup> And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' do that. <sup>34</sup> And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' lend to 'sinners,' expecting to be repaid in full. <sup>35</sup> But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. <sup>36</sup> Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.*

Again, the methods we use will be varied. Sometimes it is relief to meet immediate needs. Sometimes it is development to help people move beyond dependency to self-sufficiency. Sometimes it is social reform – changing the conditions and social structures that aggravate or cause dependency.

Begin with the gospel. Don't go it alone, but depend daily upon the power of the Holy Spirit, and serve in community.

What are the needs where we live? What would it look like to be known for how we spend ourselves on behalf of the poor and disenfranchised? Pray and obey.