

True Justice: Loving Christ

“Then the King will say to those on His right hand, ‘Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me... Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to me.’” – Matthew 25: 34-36, 40 (NKJV)

“A 17th century Jesuit priest, Peter Claver spent the majority of his life in what is now modern-day Columbia. This area of Central America was a hub for the growing slave trade and Peter would spend his days at the docks and in the slave quarters, caring for Africans who had been sold into slavery. Called ‘the slave of the slaves,’ he would provide for their physical needs, give them medical attention, and share the gospel, focusing on God’s love for all people and restoration of human dignity through Christ. One account recalls, “One night Peter recruited a couple of volunteers to help minister to a dying man whose suppurating flesh had been eaten away because of years in chains. When the volunteers saw the oozing flesh and smelled the putrid odor, they ran panic-stricken from the room. Peter cried out, ‘You mustn’t go. You can’t leave him – it is Christ.’”¹

It is Christ. The old man on the street with a tobacco-stained beard pandering for money...whether you believe he is really homeless or not, this is Christ. Little babies in faraway countries who have been orphaned by disaster and disease...they are Christ. The woman raising three kids on her own...whether she’s a widow of war or a strung out drug addict living on welfare, she is Christ. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “God wanders among us in human form, speaking to us in those who cross our paths, be they stranger, beggar, sick, or even in those nearest to us in everyday life, becoming Christ’s demand on our faith in Him.” God desires – even more – He *demands* that *we* be the ones to meet those needs. And it is as we

meet the need right in front of us that God’s perfect justice will begin to cover the entire earth.

In our instant-information, slogan-saturated culture, the word ‘justice’ can immediately bring to mind specific images that center around popular campaigns, hot-topic issues, and go-to guys who seem to have all the answers concerning how we can bring justice to a needy world. While this isn’t necessarily wrong, it can be problematic because the justice of God does not look like the justice of men. In part, yes. But not in full. Justice must begin with compassion; justice must not be detached from righteousness; and justice cannot exclude the gospel. Short of these, it is not the full work of justice that God desires to extend to those in need.

Great justice begins with small compassion. Not all of us are called to the slums like Mother Theresa – but we are all called to love our neighbor. Idealistic notions of establishing justice in remote, ‘really needy’ places are fanciful at best and egotistical at worst if I cannot help the lady next door when she calls on the phone in need of assistance. “A profound mystery: God becomes a slave. This implies very specifically that God wants to be known through servanthood.”² And we can serve anyone. Anywhere. The ways God provides for us to serve those around us may feel very small. They might also lack the stereotypical appearance of justice. Offering to lead a study group in a class where you excel; letting your roommate borrow your car; cleaning the bathroom in your apartment when it’s not your turn; taking the time to ask a student you don’t really know to lunch simply because he looks lonely.

“That’s not justice. That’s just kindness,” you say. But being kind is being loving and we can establish justice not simply by abolishing injustice, but by implementing love. The call to love the ‘normal’ people around us interrupts our daily lives by asking us to meet their small and perhaps paltry needs. Heeding the call of Christ here is often much more difficult than willingly traversing the globe for the sake of more obvious, and often more emotionally

¹ Manning, Brennan. Ruthless Trust: The Ragamuffin’s Path to God. New York: Harper One/ HarperCollins Publishers, 2000. 168.

² Manning, Brennan. The Rabbi’s Heartbeat. Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 2003. 109.

compelling matters. But little that is great is easy, and so justice must begin here – in our daily lives.

Complete justice must not be detached from righteousness. Righteousness and justice are the foundation of God's throne (Ps. 89:14, 97:2). God judges with them hand in hand (Ps. 72:2, 103:6). Justice is the process of bringing about that which is fair in light of the truth. Righteousness is the state of right living and right doing. And true, undefiled religion is living a life filled with both (James 1:27). A justice that promotes altruistic actions apart from or regardless of personal obedience to God is not fully justice. Humanitarian efforts are good and right, there is no question of that, but God desires that every aspect of our lives be submitted to Him. All of our good doings don't make up for sins we choose not to give up or areas of our hearts we refuse to surrender.

The whole of our lives are to serve as a witness to Christ – not just bits and pieces. Actions on behalf of others cannot make up for actions that defy the Lord: in the eyes of God, who considers our obedience the tangible evidence of our worship and love for Him; and in the eyes of the watching world, who believes in the love and power of God based on our desire to obey Him.

True justice cannot exclude the gospel. The hungry can be fed, the sick can be treated, the poor can be clothed and housed, but if they do not hear the message of eternal salvation through belief in Jesus Christ, they are still dead in their sins and destined to spend an eternity apart from God. A pivotal part of God's description of true justice involves bringing freedom (Isa. 58:6, Ps. 82:4). Through Christ alone we are freed from the bondage of sin and the fear of death (Heb. 2:15, 12:1, Gal. 5:1). This is the only freedom that endures forever. If people do not hear of it, their freedom is not eternal and their justice is not truly realized. Justice for justice's sake is simply humanitarian – good deeds done in human strength for this age alone. But justice for Jesus' sake is supernatural – wrong's righted by God's grace for this age and the age to come.

We *cannot* offer the gospel without meeting people's needs. "The Christian commitment is not an abstraction. It is a concrete, visible, courageous, and formidable way of being in the world forged by

daily choices consistent with inner truth. A commitment that is not visible in humble service, suffering discipleship, and creative love is an illusion."³ But we cannot fully meet people's needs unless we offer them the gospel. We cannot fully feed the hungry unless we give them the Bread of Life; we cannot truly relieve the thirsty unless we offer them Living Water; we cannot fully clothe the naked unless we tell them Christ desires to cover them in robes of righteousness; and we cannot completely shelter the homeless unless we tell them God's banner over them is love. Catherine Booth, co-founder of The Salvation Army, understood this when she said,

"Oh, precious Savior! Save us from maligning your Gospel and your name...and forgetting the dignity which crowned your sacred brow as you hung upon the cross! That is the dignity for us, and it will never suffer by any gentleman here carrying the Gospel into the back slums or alleys of any town or city in which he lives...that will be a dignity which shall be crowned in heaven, crowned with everlasting glory...that is the dignity of the Gospel – the dignity of love."⁴

Regardless of our perception of a person's state in life or our opinion of the authenticity of their plight, Christ makes Himself known to us through the people all around us. "Just as Jesus appeared at his birth as a helpless child that the world was free to care for or destroy, so now he appears in his resurrection as the pauper, the prisoner, the stranger: appears in every form of human need that the world is free to serve or ignore."⁵

We can go to the other side of the globe or we can go to the grocery store: either place we will encounter lonely, broken people with both physical and spiritual needs. We can go on our way; or we can stop, look them in the eyes and see the face of Jesus looking back

³ Manning, Brennan. The Rabbi's Heartbeat. Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 2003. 108.

⁴ Booth, Catherine. Quote taken from "Aggressive Christianity." 90 Days with Christian Classics. David Shepherd, et. al., eds. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999. 11.

⁵ Buechner, Frederick. The Faces of Jesus: A Life Story. Brewster, Massachusetts: Paraclete Press, 2006. 92.

at us as He whispers, 'Will you love Me here?' Justice demands that we cannot leave and love requires that we say yes – for this is Christ.

Heavenly Father,

Thank you that you delight in justice and that you will bring about perfect justice one day on the Earth. Thank you that we can trust in this promise when we feel powerless against injustices, both those we see and those that impact us directly. Please forgive us for the times we have not demonstrated love and justice in situations and opportunities directly surrounding us. Please help us understand what your justice looks like, give us a desire to help bring it about, and provide opportunities that allow us to do so. Enable us to see Christ in the people around us and help us, by the power of your Spirit, to love Him by serving others.

Assignment

1. Memorize Isaiah 58:6-7 and James 1:27.
2. Meet with your prayer partner from this week for a meal. Read Isaiah 58 and Matthew 25:31-46 together and discuss. What do these passages reveal about what is important to God?

Additional Reading

Psalm 72:7

Psalm 89:14

Psalm 97:2

Psalm 103:6

Isaiah 58

Matthew 20:25-28

Matthew 23:1-28

Matthew 25:31-46