

## SERMON TRANSCRIPT

06.30.2024 | Wisdom for Justice | Proverbs 2:6-9; 21:3; 28:5; 29:2, 7 | Dr. Ben Day, Senior Pastor

If you have a Bible this morning, I want to invite you to turn with me to the book of Proverbs. This morning, we're going to start in Proverbs two and read a few verses from there. And then we'll go towards the end of Proverbs and read some verses from the later chapters as we've kind of done throughout this series. This is actually the last week of our series of the study of Proverbs. We spent a few months looking at the book of Proverbs, studying it, seeking to gain some wisdom for different areas of life. Just want to let you know next week, we're going to begin a two-month study of Joseph, the story of Joseph in the book of Genesis. And so I hope you'll be here next Sunday and for the next couple of months as we have that study together. But I really appreciate our study in the Psalms. I mean, excuse me, in Proverbs. It's been a little bit different. If you've been at our church for any period of time, you'll know that we just finished a long study through the book of Matthew. We went verse by verse through the book of Matthew. And that was very much following the narrative of the book. And here in Proverbs, it's been a bit different. We've kind of gone a little bit more topical as we've seen wisdom for different areas of life. And I hope that this wisdom from this ancient book has really been helpful to you. And today we are considering the wisdom that Proverbs and the Bible has for the topic of justice. This is a bit different. We've really the last month been looking at different aspects of our own lives, our work, our words, our emotions, our money. Today, we're not just looking at something that's so maybe personal or individual, but it's rather a little bit more about the way we look at the world, the way that we act in the world. Really, the study of justice really brings us kind of full circle back to where we began.

As we began the study of Proverbs, we began by considering the way that God designed the world to be. What we're going to find that as we study the topic of justice, it's really about seeking God's design in the world, being a part of God's work to restore his creation to its original design. So I want to read for us from Proverbs, starting in Proverbs chapter two, verses six through nine say that the, for the Lord gives wisdom from his mouth come knowledge and understanding. He stores up sound wisdom for the upright. He is a shield to those who walk in integrity, guarding the paths of justice and watching over the way of his saints. Then you'll understand righteousness and justice and equity, every good path. I want to go from there all the way to Proverbs chapter 21. You'll turn to Proverbs 21, verse three, it says to do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice. And then going a little bit farther in Proverbs chapter 28, Proverbs 28 five says that evil men do not understand justice, but those who seek the Lord understand it completely. And then lastly, to consider two Proverbs from Proverbs chapter 29, Proverbs 29 two says when the righteous increase, the people rejoice, but when the wicked rule, the people groan. And then verse seven from Proverbs 29 says that a righteous man knows the rights of the poor. A wicked man does not understand such knowledge.

I became the pastor of this church in September of 2020. A lot of times when I tell people that my family, we moved to San Francisco in 2020 and I began to pastor the church in that year, they kind of sometimes raise their eyebrows and say, whoa, that was a tough time to move and that must've been a tough time to begin to pastor a new church. The reason I think most people think that is because 2020 was a pretty interesting year. As much as at the beginning of the year, people said they had 2020 vision and all sorts of thoughts of the future, really nobody saw what was coming in that year. I mean, not only was it a really hard time for the church because of the pandemic kept the church from gathering and meeting as they normally would, there's also a lot of divisive issues that came about that probably were heightened by the fact that we weren't gathering together as God's people. Many churches divided over a variety of issues. Many churches divided or saw people leave their congregation over how they handled the pandemic and the restrictions of the COVID and requiring masks and requiring vaccinations and all sorts of different things. It was very divisive for the church, but one of the most divisive, I think topics for the, really the nation, but really showed itself in the church during that time, was really the topic of justice or maybe more popularly, social justice. The idea of justice and the talk of social justice was really divisive, I think, for the church in America. You see, they had a number of things happening in our country that brought social justice really the forefront of everyone's minds. I mean, most particularly the killing of George Floyd really brought into people's kind of center of their attention the injustices of our country that had long been there and long been recognized at times, but it was really time for people to start maybe addressing them more clearly. So you had many Christians who really felt like the church had long been too silent or too absent on conversations and concerns about social justice. So they began to be very vocal and active. Many of those people I think did so in a very helpful way, but perhaps some of them began to adopt some of the world's views on justice, began to really be shaped by maybe the culture's kind of definitions of justice and really began to adopt some of the culture's kind

of slogans about justice. And that led another part of the church to really say, well, hold on, all of this focus on justice and social justice is really maybe distracting the church from what we should be focused on. We shouldn't be focused so much on social matters. We should really be focused on preaching the gospel. That's really should be what we're all about.

And really I found that I think that like as often the case, when it came to a polarizing issue, people too quickly gravitated to kind of the extremes they missed, what I think is really the rich kind of center that God's word has for them. That really God's word has a lot to say about justice and social justice. A lot of wisdom for the people of God on the topic. And it's not to be silent, but it's also not to adopt the world's views. There's actually a really rich understanding in scripture of how we as the people of God are to think about and to pursue justice in our world. And I was really disheartened to see so much of the church just kind of neglecting that fact. In fact, one of the first things I did when I became the pastor here is we started a Zoom kind of Bible study that was really a biblical look at racial reconciliation. And I found that it was kind of a challenge to do because we were on Zoom, we couldn't be in the same room and these were tough topics. But I found it to be really fruitful conversation because people really appreciated being able to look into God's word and see that it actually spoke about the very issues that we are facing today. And what I think we find when we look in the Bible and particularly what we'll see here in Proverbs is that God cares about justice.

God wants his people to care about justice. That the church was never supposed to be silent or kind of out of the conversation when it came to talking about social justice. But at the same time, they must be shaped, the people of God must be shaped by the wisdom of God. The righteousness of God when it comes to this topic and the way that we live it out in the world. And so let's consider from Proverbs kind of three components to walking in God's wisdom for justice. And really the beginning, it starts with understanding where we get justice or the idea of justice from. And so I want to point out to you this morning that true justice is rooted in the righteousness of God. True justice is rooted in God's righteousness. One of the things that I think is interesting as you were to talk to people today is, I think you would find that many people probably have really different kind of thoughts and feelings about the words justice and righteous. Especially if you were to talk to maybe people who aren't religious or who aren't Christians. I think a lot of times if you were to talk to people in our city, they would probably have pretty positive feelings about justice. I think most people in San Francisco really want justice in some way. They would say they stand for justice. So many times people are protesting or taking action because they want to see justice in the world. I think there would be good connotations in our culture around the word justice. But the word righteous or righteousness, I'm not sure if people would have such good feelings about that word. I think a lot of times in our culture today, the idea of being righteous is really kind of a stiff religious term that really means that you kind of think you're better than everybody else.

But really in the Bible, the two are not separated at all. In fact, so often, especially in the Old Testament, the ideas of being just and righteous are linked. They really find their connection first in God himself. God is so often described, not as just sometimes righteous and sometimes just, but so often the description of God is righteous and just. Many times God is described as a righteous judge. So you have to understand when people talk about God being righteous, what they mean is that God is right in all that he says and all that he does. That his actions and his words are in line with his right character and they are always in the right way, always in the right manner. Therefore, if justice is really kind of making things right, if you would think of justice as being things kind of equitable or fair or right in the world, you would see that justice is connected to, it's deeply rooted in God's righteousness. Because what God does and says is right, he is just in all of his actions, but it also means that therefore, if we are ever going to pursue justice in our world, if we're ever going to truly understand justice, we really have to understand the righteousness of God. We have to understand that what God says and does is what is truly right and just for us to be truly people who understand justice and pursue it. So notice how Proverbs kind of gives us this idea. Proverbs links righteousness and justice together all throughout the book. In fact, in the very first verses that opened the book of Proverbs in chapter one, which we read at the beginning of this series, it talked about how wisdom is going to instruct you in matters of righteousness and justice. We also saw that in chapter two, which we just read. So this is chapter two, verse six, the Lord gives wisdom from his mouth, come knowledge and understanding. He stores up sound wisdom for the upright. He is a shield to those who walk in integrity, guarding the paths of justice, watching over the way of his saints. And then notice what it says, then you will understand righteousness and justice and equity, every good path.

The Bible says, when you seek God in his wisdom, that's when you'll truly understand righteousness and justice, because as you seek God, and as you understand him and his wisdom, then you will be guided by him into what he is doing and what he is like. Therefore, you will be walking in matters of righteousness and justice. And I think this is really significant for two reasons. One, I think it's important to know that true justice is going to be rooted in God's righteousness, because it reminds us that those who do not know God, those who do not seek him in his wisdom, actually do not rightly, completely understand true justice. If true justice is rooted in God's righteousness and knowing how to be just comes from God's wisdom, then it would make sense, I think, that those who don't seek God or seek his wisdom would actually know how to be just in the world. In fact, that's what we read in Proverbs 28, verse five. It says, "Evil men do not understand justice, but those who seek the Lord understand it completely." Do you notice the contrast in that verse? You notice how it says, "Evil men don't understand justice," or "wicked men," some translations, but they're contrasted with not just good people, but people who seek the Lord. I think what Proverbs is trying to say is, those who don't seek God will not actually understand true justice, but those who are shaped by God and his wisdom, they will begin to understand what is truly just in the world.

It's important to point this out, because I think it's worth saying that we cannot always listen to the language of justice or adopt the forms of thinking about justice from those who aren't seeking God. Now, before you just write me off as kind of a closed-minded Christian, I would say that I don't believe that people who aren't Christians or who aren't seeking God never know anything about justice. People who aren't seeking God and his wisdom would never know anything about injustice. Actually, I think because all people are made in God's image, I think because common grace is available in our world, that God is kind of commonly given his grace amongst the whole world. Because I think Christianity has had such an influence in the Western world, that I actually think that there's many people who aren't Christians that often rightly understand things about justice. They often rightly can point out injustice. Like many times, it is the world who points out injustices that sometimes the church might be blind to or ignorant of. So I'm not saying that people who aren't Christians would never understand anything about justice or injustice, but what I am saying is I think Proverbs is helping us to see that without seeking the Lord and his wisdom, without really being shaped by the Lord and his righteousness, one could never truly pursue complete justice. That as long as the world is not seeking God in his ways, while they might be able to point out forms of injustice in our world, I think we need to be hesitant about adopting their forms of pursuing justice. So many times, I think their ways of pursuing justice might be a bit misguided or a bit incomplete.

I think so many times, systems of justice that seek to lift up people who maybe were oppressed are actually just turning them into the oppressors themselves. You have to be careful, I think, about adopting the form of justice because I think only those who really seek God in his wisdom really understand justice. But actually, that leads to a second point that I think is maybe more prevalent for us as the church. And that is those who really are seeking God and those who really have been made righteous by God should be passionate and should care about justice, should truly understand what justice should look like in our world. So you go to Proverbs chapter 29, verse 7, the last one that we read. It says, "A righteous man knows the rights of the poor, and a wicked man does not understand such knowledge." Now here in our church, we often use the English standard version of the Bible. It's one of many English translations, and overall, I find it to be a really helpful one. But I have to tell you, I think in this verse, the ESV is maybe not the best. If you find other translations of the Bible, Proverbs 29, 7 will often say that the righteous person has concern for the rights of the poor, but the wicked person has no such concern. The language in the Hebrew doesn't seem to be speaking so much about like head knowledge, like we might think about it when we read that the knowledge of the rights of the poor, rather it seems to be speaking about a more intimate, passionate knowledge. But I think what's being communicated really in Proverbs 29, 7 is that those who are truly righteous with the Lord will not just know the rights of the poor, but be passionate about the rights of the poor. But those who do not know the Lord in His righteousness will not have such a concern.

The question is, well, are we people who are righteous? The Bible reminds us that we are not righteous by anything that we do. That so many times people who would find their righteousness in and of themselves in a self-righteousness are people who do not really understand justice. They're people who do not really care about the rights of the poor. I mean, if you pay attention to the New Testament, Jesus is so often calling out those who are self-righteous, and He's pointing out their hypocrisy and the fact that they don't seem to care about the people who are poor. The Bible tells us that we are made righteous, not by our own good works, our own self-righteousness, but by what Jesus has done. As we'll remember as we come to the table, it is only by Jesus' body and His blood that we are made right with God. And the Bible says that when we are made right with God, it's not just as if we are forgiven of our sins and that we are to go on

living as we want to live, but God is actually doing a work in us to transform us from the inside out, that we might not just be righteous because of what Jesus has done, but we might actually grow to live righteous lives. And I love the way that one theologian described living righteously or being righteous. So there's this theologian named Alec Maudier, and he says, "Righteous, being righteous, is those who are right with God and therefore committed to putting right all other relationships in life." The people of God, if they're really going to be righteous, it's not going to be a self-righteousness that they've earned, it's that they are right with God through what Jesus has done, and now they are being changed by God to try to put all other relationships in the world right.

And really, I think that's what justice is all about, seeking to make right all relationships in the world, seeking to right all the wrongs. Those who have been made right with God are the ones who should be pursuing justice, and that really kind of leads us to the second point of wisdom for justice today. And that is, doing justice is the responsibility of God's people. Doing justice is the responsibility of God's people. I mean, if justice is rooted in God's righteousness, and what we're saying is God is redeeming a people for himself, making them right with him, but also transforming them to live righteous lives, it would make sense that those are the people that are to pursue justice in the world. They are the people who are to do justice. And I use the language of doing justice because it often comes up in the Bible. Perhaps one of the most famous verses on this topic is Micah 6, verse 8. Maybe you've heard it before. "He has told you, O man, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God." He says this is what the people of God are to do. They are to do justice. In fact, at times, it is clear in the Bible that doing justice is more important than even offering a right sacrifice to God. That's what Proverbs tells us in Proverbs 21.3. "To do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice."

So many times we might think being righteous people is about just our relationship with God. And it is. We have to be right with God. But what the Bible is trying to teach us is that being a person of God is not just about offering him the right sacrifices, but by being in right relationships with people, by pursuing justice in the world. So many times throughout the history of the people of God in the Old Testament and then the people of God in the New Testament and still today, the church or the people of God has gotten this wrong. So many times the people have at times focused on the sacrifices or the worship of God as if that's the only thing that's important, and neglected the social sphere or the care for the people in the world, the pursuit of justice in the world. In fact, if you read the minor prophets, you'll find that this message comes up a lot. God tells his people, "I don't really want your sacrifices. I don't really want your feasts in your festivals, even though I've commanded them. I don't want your burnt offerings and I don't want to hear your worship songs. But instead, let justice roll like mighty waters. Let righteousness flow like an ever flowing stream." These verses were really fundamental to people like Martin Luther King Jr. and civil rights activists, people who were calling out the church, maybe specifically the white church in America, for saying that, "Well, we can be righteous because we're offering the right sacrifices," but they were neglecting the justice of the world. They were participating in injustices in the world. The Bible is clearly showing over and over that doing justice is the responsibility of the people of God.

So while we would have to hear from the first point, I think, that we can't just always accept the world's forms of justice and always follow their patterns for how to pursue justice. We also could never say that we're just supposed to preach the gospel and forget about matters of social justice. That's never what God's people were called to do. Always God's people have been called to do justice. Now, I think the question that people often ask is, "Well, what does it mean to do justice?" A lot of times people, I think, would defend themselves and say, "Well, I'm not doing anything unjust myself." The book of Proverbs does talk a lot about not participating in injustices. Proverbs talks about not taking bribes and unjust scales and all sorts of things like that. But I think the Bible's view of justice is actually a little bit more than just not being unjust. I mentioned last week, as we were talking about wisdom for our money, that in the Old Testament, God had commands for how His people were to care for those who were in need or to care for the poor. In fact, as we even heard in Proverbs 29, it says that the righteous person cares about or knows the rights of the poor. What were the rights of the poor? Well, you can find a lot of them in the Old Testament law. Just to give you one, in Deuteronomy chapter 15, verses 7 and 8, God tells His people, "If among you one of your brothers should become poor in any of your towns, with your land the Lord your God has given you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother. But you shall open your hand to Him and lend Him sufficient for His need, whatever it may be."

God's form of justice throughout the Old Testament was not just about not doing the bad things of injustice, but justice also meant caring for those in need, creating systems and taking action that would care for the people who were poor, that who were going without. And so we could not ever just say, I think, that to do justice in our world is to only not participate in injustice, but it must also, I think, call us to action, to actually meet the needs of people who are in need. That to do justice in our world is to care about people who are neglected or oppressed and to take some form of action. Now, I'll be honest with you, I don't always have the right answer as to what that looks like. When you look around our city and the many needs that we have, I recognize that sometimes it seems like an almost impossible task, an insurmountable task at times to meet the needs of every person and to pursue justice and do justice. But at least I think part of the wisdom of God's word would tell us that we can't just pass that problem off to someone else. To say, well, if our city and its leaders would get its act together, then people would be cared for. Maybe it is about passing some laws and electing some right leaders, but I think it's mostly about the people of God taking action. We can't just always say, maybe it's someone else's problem to deal with. I think we need to do something. If nothing else, I think that is what Proverbs is helping us to see, that there is a call for us to participate in doing justice, to do something.

There's a song by a Christian artist named Matthew West. It's called "Do Something." I have to be honest with you, I've always found the song a little cheesy, so if you go listen to it, that's my disclaimer. I find it a little cheesy, but I do love actually the message of it. He basically says that he can walk around and see all the problems in the world, and what he wants to do is just tell God, "God, why don't you do something about all this?" And basically he says, when he does that, God looks at him and says, "I created you." In other words, you go do something about it. That's why I have you here on this earth. I think that is a good reminder for us as the church, although I think it does neglect something. And that is, God is calling us to do something, but it's not absent of God's work. It is in conjunction with God's work. It is in partnership with God's work. And that is because when we do justice, the goal of justice is the restoration of God's design. This is the last part of wisdom that I want us to grasp this morning. That as justice is rooted in God's wisdom and God's righteousness, as we said from the beginning of this kind of series, God wove wisdom into his creation. It was part of his design.

The pursuit of justice is really the pursuit of restoring what God had designed. God's good design, God's good creation has been fractured by sin. And the goal of doing justice is to see that restored in the world. This is why we need God's wisdom because God's wisdom knows what true justice looks like and knows what it's going to look like when it's restored. Justice can't just always be what we might want it to be, what's convenient for us, but rather having God's wisdom to know how do we restore it to God's design. And the Bible says this is actually a work that God is doing. That God is calling his people to participate in doing justice because that is actually what he is doing in the world. He says that he is making all things new, that he is restoring the world to his original design. He is bringing shalom. In the Hebrew, in the Jewish culture, shalom, it means peace, but it means more than just the absence of conflict, peace. It really means everything in its right place. And the Bible says God is working to bring shalom in the world, everything in its right place. And when he does so, it is going to be good for all people who would trust in his plan, who would trust in his design. That's why I love this verse in Proverbs that says, "When the righteous increase, the people rejoice, but when the wicked rule, the people groan."

Again, a lot of people probably would not like the idea of righteousness in our world today. It doesn't sound good to them. But what Proverbs is saying is they would actually appreciate righteous people increasing, having more say, having more leadership, having more activity. Because what is happening is as truly righteous people, not just those who claim to be righteous or are self-righteous, but those who are really right with God and are pursuing making all relationships right. They are the ones who are going to do justice. And when justice is done, it leads people to rejoice. It leads people to appreciate what is happening because that is God's design. In some ways, I think this is like what God was calling the people of Israel to do when he sent them into Babylon. And he told them, "Seek the welfare of the city. Seek the good of the city." He was telling them, "Bring shalom, bring peace, bring justice where you can, because it will be good for all people of the city." What I would hope, church family, is that there would be some people in San Francisco who would say, "You know what? I don't really believe the same things that those folks at First Baptist believe. I don't necessarily believe all the things that they talk about with the Bible. But I'm really happy that that church is in our city. I don't necessarily agree with them on everything, but they do make a difference on their little corner of Octavia and Waller." You know, one group who I think would honestly say that would be people at John Muir Elementary. We've been able to build a relationship with John Muir Elementary, a nearby elementary school. We seek to just invest in the staff and the

families of that school in ways that we can. And we've heard the principal, we've heard faculty say, you know, "We're not Christians. We may not come to your church, but we're so grateful for this partnership. We're so thankful that you guys have chosen to partner with us." I pray that there would be more people like that in San Francisco. Not that we would want everybody to disagree with us. I mean, we want some people to come, but that there would be some people, at least in our city, who may not believe what we are believing, but they would love the fact that we are here.

Because what they see is that as we pursue righteousness and justice in the world, it is actually bringing restoration to God's design, and that is good for all people. And the promise is that this is the work that God is doing, that our pursuit of justice is not in vain. I mentioned Martin Luther King Jr. earlier and the way that he spoke from God's word to call the church to do justice. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said that the long arc of history bends towards justice, because he believed that that was what God is doing in the world, that when we seek to do something, it's not just that we're on our own trying to make the world a little bit better, but that we are joining in on God's word to make all things new.

And again, this is what we see as we come to the table this morning. As we come to the table this morning, we are reminded that we can be made right before God because of what Jesus has done. Jesus came to express both the mercy and the grace and the justice of God. That God who is just could not just excuse sin, but sin had to be atoned for. And Jesus came and his body was broken and his blood was shed. And as we remember that today, we are reminded that we are made right with God only by what Jesus has done. But also the Bible tells us that as you come to the table, you don't just look back and remember what Jesus has done. It says we continue to proclaim his death until he comes again.

The table also draws our attention forward to another time when we're going to gather around an even greater table. And I know here you only get like a little bite of bread and a little cup of juice, but on that day it'll be a much bigger table with a much better feast. It will be the wedding feast of God's people that when God comes to make all things new, when he comes to bring justice in our world, which both means judging those who have not trusted in him, but also restoring the world to its original design, we will be with them and we will get to appreciate that. So as we come to the table this morning, let us be reminded of how we can be made righteous, how we are made righteous in Jesus, how God's justice is satisfied in Jesus. But let it also push us to pursue justice and to join God in this work as he is making all things new.