

SERMON TRANSCRIPT

07.13.2025 | Social Justice: Pray, Think, Talk | Matthew 5:13-16 and 6:9-10 | Dr. Tim Wiarda

I know we've been doing a series on the church's mission, and this morning it's social justice. So we're talking about big society-wide issues. I mean, racism, Black Lives Matter, immigration, social equality, unions, taxes and tariffs, Medicare, student loan relief, global warming, foreign aid, Ukraine, Gaza, diversity, equality, inclusiveness. There's a progressive version of social justice, a liberal version, a conservative version, a right-wing nationalist version. And it's local as well as national issues, a rent control, bike lanes, homeless policy, merit-based versus lottery-based admission to Lowell High School, social justice, who wins or who loses if you close the great highway?

So social justice is important. It's also messy, complex and divisive. But in some ways it shouldn't be messy or divisive. I mean, justice is simple. It's clear and solid as a rock. Children understand it. They want equal treatment. They want fair rewards and punishments. Sports fans understand it. Level playing field, impartial referees. Shoppers understand it. When you buy something, you want what it says on the package to match what it really is.

Well, the Bible tells us that justice is a central attribute of God. I will proclaim the name of the Lord. All his ways are justice, a God of faithfulness and without iniquity. Just and upright is he. The Lord sits enthroned forever. His establishes throne for justice. And justice is a goal of Jesus' mission. Isaiah prophesied, "Behold my servant whom I uphold, my chosen and whom my soul delights. I have put my spirit upon him. He will bring forth justice to the nations." And justice is at the heart of God's law. I mean, to do righteousness and justice, Proverbs says, is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice. And Isaiah says, "Learn to do good. Seek justice. Correct oppression. Bring justice to the fatherless. Plead the widow's cause."

Well, this morning we want to see what perspective Jesus' words about salt and light give us on this topic. So it's Matthew 5, 13 to 16. Matthew 5, 13 to 16. Let me read. "You are the salt of the earth, but if the salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden, nor do people light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." In the Sermon on the Mount,

This is part of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives fundamental instructions for his followers. And here he talks about our identity. He says, "You are salt. You are light." Now those are two-word pictures, but they're really talking about one thing, us. Salt and light describe one specific aspect of our lives. I mean, look what it says. It says, "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works." To be light means to do good works. And if that's what light means, salt means the same thing. Because in this passage, those two are parallel. They go together.

So a central part of our identity in Christ, we are people who do good works. And some more things these verses show us. A role as salt and light relates to the world outside the church. We are the salt of the earth. We are the light of the world. Now there's a place for good works which touch only me. I mean, if I discipline my body, if I am pure in my private thoughts, those are good works. But not the kind that Jesus is talking about here. And Jesus is not talking about in-house church things. I mean, we do good works to one another within the fellowship of the church. But being salt and light is what we do in society. And these verses show that being salt and light is a matter of visibility. I mean, really, I mean, against that song.

One little thing about that song. It's a great song. But it's really not a choice to hide our light under a bushel. What Jesus is saying is you cannot hide under a bushel. All you can do is make sure that the light that shines is really light. We are a city set on a hill, Jesus says. Whether we like it or not, we cannot be hidden. The people in the world around us will definitely see us. And Jesus says another thing. Our saltiness and the light we shine will shape the world's view of God. He says, "Let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works." We can't avoid seeing whatever we are. "And give glory to your Father who is in heaven." So what's the connection between my good works and God's glory? Well, God is good and just. And if God's people reflect those traits, the world will know that God cares about justice.

And if Christians are not good and just, the world is going to think the opposite. When someone came into 1st Baptist and began to preach that God is not good and just, I hope we would throw them out because what we preach and teach about God is serious business. But if our actions are something other than good and just, if goodness and justice is noticeably absent from our lives, then regardless of what we teach with our lips, our lives will be shouting in a loud voice that justice is absent from God. Which may be like we're putting up a banner that says on it, "God is not good." And then if the society around us doesn't give glory to our Father who is in heaven, whose fault would it be?

So a final thing, salt and light is our identity, but it's not automatic. When Jesus says we are salt, he immediately goes on to speak about the possibility of losing our saltiness. And when he says we are light, he immediately issues a command, "Let your light shine." Okay, now, this passage doesn't say good works, or excuse me, it doesn't say just works. It doesn't say they will see your justice, your just works. It says they will see your good works. So I'm going to broaden this morning's topic a little bit, not just talk about social justice, but talk about social goodness.

Now, what's the difference between justice and goodness? Well, justice is fairness in the way people are dealt with. It's assigning merited rewards and punishments. It's the impartial adjustment of conflicting claims. I got those out of the dictionary. Goodness is a broader term. It includes justice. It's everything that justice is but more. It's justice with the addition of helping others out of friendliness, kindness, generosity, and compassion. I mean, goodness is justice plus.

So since this passage here talks about good works, let's talk about, let's expand social justice a little bit to include social goodness. Now, in the Old Testament law, for instance, Ten Commandments, don't steal, don't kill, don't bear false witness. That is justice. It is vital. But the Old Testament law also says things like lend to the poor. Even when it's practically a gift because the year of release is coming and you probably aren't going to get paid back. That's mercy and generosity. It goes beyond simple justice. The law says things like, "You shall not see your brother's ox or his sheep going astray and ignore them. You shall take them back to your brother." Well, taking your brother's ox, your neighbor's ox back to him, that's a costly act of kindness. I mean, you're on your work out to your fields. You see this ox. It might take you half a day to get it back to the owner.

In the early 1990s, we lived for two and a half years in Oman. I was pastoring a church for the English-speaking foreign community there. And one day, we went on a church picnic. It was up in the mountains outside of Salala where there were some trees and green grass. And we're up there having this church picnic and these mountain tribesmen come along. A couple of guys, kind of exotic-looking guys, you know. And they told us they had a sick camel they were trying to get in a pickup truck, and they needed some help. Wow, so I'm thinking. Strange mountain tribesmen, sick camel, church picnic. I said, "Okay, and we'll go." And so I went, and a few of the other church guys went with me, and we walk over to where this camel is. And here's this camel down on four knees, and they've got a pickup truck backed up with the gate down. And the camel's head is kind of sticking up toward the back of that pickup truck. And there's, I don't know, three or four of these mountain guys, and four or five, three or four of us, I don't know. And they've got a halter, a rope around the camels, and a couple of guys up in the pickup truck pulling the head, and the rest of us are supposed to get down underneath the bent knees, and one on each, or a couple of us, I guess, on each of the four corners of this camel. And we went at it and huffed and puffed and finally got it into the pickup truck. I guess that was an act of kindness, but it was no picnic. And I don't know what those church members thought about their pastor getting him into a mess like that. Do you know what it's like to grab hold of the leg of a camel with diarrhea?

Okay, there's justice and there's also goodness. God requires both, because that's the way he is. Micah says, "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice and love, kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" This morning we're talking about social justice. And that refers to group actions toward larger social groups, the whole church in relation to the whole world. I mean, social goodness, social justice and social goodness is an extension of personal goodness. And personal goodness is vital, and I assume you know that and you're committed to practicing that in your lives. But this morning we're going to jump over that, vital as it is, and focus on society-wide issues of justice and goodness. I mean, issues that are citywide and nationwide. What about worldwide? I mean, we're Americans, right? We talk about social goodness. Are there national boundaries?

Well, Jesus said, "Salt of the earth, light of the world." I don't think we can put limits on that. And Jesus, a man came to Jesus one time and asked him, "Who is my neighbor?" That was a bad question. He was trying to justify himself. And so

Jesus told the parable, "The Good Samaritan." Well, the Good Samaritan didn't put national limits on his generosity. He treated a foreigner, a Jew, like a neighbor, a member of a different ethnic group living in a different territory. And Jesus said, "Go and do likewise." So we're talking about citywide, nationwide, worldwide issues. And if I were going to summarize this passage, I guess I would just say, we're called to practice and promote social justice and social goodness. The world is watching. God's reputation is at stake.

But what can we do? I mean, how can we promote and practice social justice on this big scale? I mean, personal justice, we can control. The choices are all up to us, and most of the issues are easy to understand. But social justice, thousands of millions of people and hundreds of factors that are beyond our control, deep complexity. I mean, we may sense that things aren't right in society, but what can we possibly do about it? Well, this morning I'm just going to mention three things that all of us can do.

First is to start with prayer. And let me be more specific. Start by praying the first three petitions of the Lord's prayer every day. Matthew 6, 9, and 10. Just a page over from the Salt and Light passage. "Pray then like this, Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." And Jesus said, "Pray like this." It's a daily prayer. I mean, give us this day our daily bread is part of it. And not give us tomorrow our daily bread, not give us today our bread for the whole week, but we've got to ask today's bread today. And that means Jesus intends this to be this whole prayer, something we pray every day.

Well, what do the first three petitions, God's name, God's kingdom, God's will, what does that have to do with social goodness? Well, they're both in the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew 5 talks about Salt and Light. Matthew 6, these petitions of the Lord's prayer. But when we look at the content of these two passages, the Salt and Light passage and the Lord's prayer, we see there's a tight connection between praying this prayer and being salt and light. I mean, look at the third petition. "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." And this is often misunderstood.

So let me just take a minute and explain. New Testament talks about God's will in two senses. I mean, first of all, there is His revealed and commanded will. What He has told us, He desires us to do. So for example, in 1 Thessalonians 4, this is the will of God for you that you abstain from sexual immorality. Or in 1 Thessalonians 5, "Give thanks in all circumstances, for that's the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." Or in 1 Peter 2, "For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people." So sexual purity, being thankful, doing good deeds, those are parts or examples of doing God's revealed will.

What He commands us. But there's a second sense. God's will can mean God's sovereign purpose and plan. And the classic verse on that is in James 4. It says, "Don't boast about the future. You don't know what tomorrow will bring." Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that." So what sense is it in the Lord's prayer? Well the context shows that here is clearly talking about God's revealed and commanded will. I mean, look, it says that little add-on. Add on earth as it is in heaven. In heaven, God's will is always carried out. When God commands His angels in heaven, they obey. But when God commands humans on earth, they often don't obey. I mean, planet earth is rebel territory. So this prayer is for God to change that situation, to act so that earth will become a place of obedience just like heaven.

And then if you look at this prayer, it consists of petitions. There are six of them, and this is one of those petitions. Petitions are requests. So this prayer, "Your will be done," is a request for God to act. It's not me saying, "Lord, I realize my job application might not get accepted, but I'm willing to accept that. Your will be done." No, it's God, it's making a request that God will act. Father, your laws and commands, your expressed desires are not being carried out in the world. Take action. Bring sinners to repentance. Change people's hearts. Strengthen the church to be faithful in doing your will. Because a large part of God's will being done on earth, His revealed and commanded will, is the church being salt and light.

I pray this prayer every day. It's been my habit for many years as part of my morning quiet time to pray the Lord's prayer. And when I pray, "Your will be done," I focus on some area that comes to my mind where I would especially like to see God's commands carried. I mean, often I have focused on myself and my family that we would live the way God wants us to. And sometimes I focus on the world that the nations would turn away from wars and corruption and evil practices.

But in recent years, more than ever, what has been on my heart to pray for is that the church, Christians, would practice and promote justice and goodness at a society-wide level. In other words, that we belong to Jesus would be salt and light in. And look at the first petition in the Lord's Prayer. "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name." It means, "May your name be held in honor by the people of the world." And that too is a call for God to take action because His name often is not honored the way it. And that first petition is totally connected to the third because when is God's name going to be honored? Well, it's when His will is done. And conversely, if His desires are ignored, His name is dishonored. So that's the same principle we saw in the verses about salt and light. What happens when the church lets its light shine? People see our good works. What happens when they see them? They give glory to our Father who is in heaven. Good works, God's name glorified. His will done on earth as it is in heaven, His name is hallowed.

Well, what about that second petition? We pray that we as Christians will do God's will. We ask God to act so that people in the world will glorify His name. What about your kingdom come? Well, God's name can only be glorified. God's will will only be done when God's kingdom comes. God's kingdom means His reign and His rule. We're saying, "Father, come, establish Your reign in this rebellious world." And God's reign comes through Jesus. He's the Messiah, the promised King. He came proclaiming the arrival of God's kingdom. It was good news. Sinners forgiven. Sight to the blind. Prisoners set free. Salvation to the poor. Satan defeated. Transformed lives that were able to be salt and light. That's what happened when Jesus came and brought the reign of God into our world. One day, Jesus will physically return and establish His reign, His kingdom fully on earth. But right now, He is actively reigning from the throne of heaven. He exercises His reign through the Holy Spirit who He sends and through the work of the gospel. So this prayer, "Your kingdom come," means, "Father, come and exercise Your rule now, in and through Your church," as Jesus sends the Holy Spirit who touches people's lives through the good news about Jesus.

So why is praying these three petitions so essential if we are to practice and promote social justice? It's because our actions are shaped by our attitudes, and our attitudes are shaped by prayer. When I pray this prayer, it forces me to see the connection between the church doing God's will and God's name being glorified. If I pray this prayer, it engages my heart daily in the battle for God's name and God's will. And it shows me that both of those issues are tied to God's saving rule through Jesus Christ. So how is your attitude? Is concern for justice and goodness at the forefront of your heart? Because if it isn't, your attitude toward the great social justice issues of today will be driven by self-interest, complacency, tribalism, might-makes-rightism, go-with-a-flowism, me-firstism.

Preachers sometimes make bold and dramatic statements about church and society. You've got to be a little cautious about these. Are they really based in Scripture? Do they reflect sound analysis of current events? But this morning, here's my bold statement. If God's people in America prayed the Lord's Prayer every day, and if they understood what the first three petitions meant, it would change their hearts, shape their thinking, transform the church's testimony at a national level, and revolutionize its impact and influence on society. So let's say we pray.

There's a second thing we need to do, and that is think with justice and goodness. Let's say my heart is right. It's right where it should be. Well, I've still got to think with my mind because social issues are complex. I mean, my passion for justice may be strong, but if I don't think, I can make some serious mistakes. I mean, have you ever been furious when you heard about someone who did something that was totally unjust, and then realized later you hadn't really known the whole story, and that, in fact, they were completely innocent? Well, have you ever done a kind deed? But because you misjudged the situation, ended up doing more harm than good?

So we can't just plow ahead without thinking. But how do we think well about social issues? Here's a few thoughts. First, we've got to listen to God's Word. We've got to test the spirits. I mean, there are spirits out there on social media. There are spirits out there who send you text messages. Some of them claim to be prophets speaking from God. Some of them wave a Bible. We need to test them by Scripture. First SF is a Southern Baptist Church. It's also an American Baptist Church. I think it originally was called an American Baptist Church, and some decades back, also aligned with the Southern Baptist Convention. So we are dually aligned, but that does mean we are aligned with the Southern Baptist And the Southern Baptist Convention has got some social and justice issues in its history. It was started in 1845 and split with the Northern Baptists because of the slavery issue. Southern Baptist Church supported slavery. And then after the Civil War, there was a long period where there was a lot of accommodation to racism.

In 2005, I began to teach at Golden Gate Baptist Seminary. It's a Southern Baptist Convention school. And I had to be interviewed by the trustees. And because these trustees lived in states all around, and several of them were going to be at the Southern Baptist Convention, their national annual meeting in Nashville, Tennessee that year, they asked me to go to Nashville to have this interview. Now, I was a Baptist. I've been a Baptist since I was a young person. I went from Michigan and didn't know all that much about the Southern Baptists. But the Seminary, Gateway Seminary, I loved what I saw at the seminary. I felt privileged to have a chance to teach there. But just sort of in the back of my mind, maybe a few misgivings about Southern Baptists because of that history. So I'm out there in Nashville, and I had a little spare time before the interview. And the denomination headquarters is there. And I went into the lobby, and I was just looking around. And they had this really nice display showing the history. As you looked around, the different points of history in the Southern Baptist Convention. And they had some panels that described the whole history with slavery and racism. But then they had some panels showing a point where the denomination officially had come to a point of repentance. And some panels describing how they were committing themselves to, in the future, act with justice in that area and correct what was wrong. And that display, just there looking at that, it made me feel good, despite the painful history. But what they were doing, and the way that display was put out, acknowledging that, it made me think that a commitment to Bible truth had corrected and overcome a cultural bias.

So we need to begin with Scripture. And then we need to examine ourselves. I mean, dig around in the corners of our mind, are there forces in us that work against the desire for justice and goodness, and that really threaten our ability to think clearly? I'm talking about, first of all, self-interest. I mean, of course, bike lanes are unfair, because they took away my parking spots. And of course, tax breaks for the middle class are just. It's not a middle class. And I need to be careful of my natural partiality to my own ethnic group or social class. I mean, there's that danger of social contamination. We are not just hearing, not able to think clearly about what the Bible says, because we're just caught up with everyone else in our social in-group is saying. And then there's a tendency, I've got to watch out for selective justice. You know, you pick your issues. I mean, you will you know, the kind of problem where a person maintains the highest standards of sexual immorality, but has no problem cheating the poor. Or they think, I've been righteous in this area, so I can ease up a little bit in that other area. Well, the Bible says we can't be selective like that. We've got to keep God's whole law.

And then I've got to pursue the wisdom that comes from above. James 3. A checklist. Wisdom from below, wisdom from above. Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct, let him show his work in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition, that is, self-interest in your hearts, don't boast about it and be false to the truth. That's not wisdom that comes down from above, but it's earthly unspiritual demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition or self-interest exist, there will be disorder in every vile practice. But the wisdom above is first pure, not mixed motives. Yeah, I would like to have justice, but I also want what I want. And then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits. Impartiality, not given to bias because of my group or my social class, and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. So we pray and we think, and just one last thing I want to mention. We can all talk with wisdom from above. I mean, why talk? Isn't salt and light about doing good works? When it comes to personal justice and goodness, yeah, action is everything, words are almost nothing. But with these massive social issues all around us, I mean, we feel like observers more than active players.

And one thing we do, though, is talk. I mean, I think America is in a period where there's a lot of intense talk about social and political issues everywhere. I can't ever remember a time when there was so much of that, and I get pulled into it in certain settings. And right now, evangelical Christians, even Baptists, have national visibility. And what the nation sees in evangelicals and all these issues in Baptists affects how Jesus is seen. So it's a practical matter. What kind of visibility will my social justice conversations give to Jesus? I mean, my talk, that's me being an influencer. I mean, I want to influence people to give glory to God. And I may not have a big audience, but if just one sentence I speak can influence one person to give a little more glory to God, that has eternal value.

Sometimes, I'm just talking about myself, I walk away from these conversations unsatisfied. Not because I couldn't articulate myself well or convince anyone, but because I'm not sure what I said and the way I said it would actually lead anyone to glorify God more. I mean, that's the real test of good talk. Not whether they like what I say, but whether at a deep level and in the long run, they will respect God more after I've spoken than before I spoke. Do I keep values to the forefront? Not just the policy position I favor, but do I express something of the values? Do I come across as someone

who cares about justice, has thought carefully about the issue at hand? What if I prefaced every statement by connecting it to God and who He is? So whatever the issue, what if I were to say things like, "I know God is a just God, so here's what I think about this." "I know God is a God of compassion, so it seems to me this is what we ought to support." "I know God has been good to me beyond anything I've deserved, so here's what I support on this issue." Because if we talk like that, people are going to see in our words something of who God is, and they are going to give glory to God.

Let me just summarize what I've been trying to say. We're called to practice and promote social justice and social goodness. The world is watching. God's reputation is at stake. So we pray for God's name and kingdom and will. And we do our best to think with justice and goodness, and we talk with wisdom from above that reflects the goodness of God.