



Studies in the Psalms Keys to the Joyful Life 7

Summary: The joyful life involves persistently choosing justice and righteousness which mirror the character of God.

This morning I have to use a word that evokes a lot of emotion and energy in our culture right now. I have to use the J word. And ironically, it's not Jesus – though we will absolutely be talking about Him too. No, the J word I'm referring to is: justice.

It's amazing how strongly people feel about this word and how many ideas, arguments and images are associated with it. Today "justice" often stirs up thoughts of protests which immediately sets our minds racing with what we think about those protests and their merits or lack thereof. So when someone says the word "justice" most people instantly and subconsciously react by putting up their defenses and expecting to fight for their side.

But whether you're new to this church, or visiting, or you've been here for years, I'll tell you how we approach things here at City Gates: we put the Bible first. We're not here for social commentary this morning. This isn't a 'weekly roundup' of spiritual response to the news or current events. We're not here to have our political ideology affirmed. We're here to be challenged, comforted, corrected, and strengthened by biblical theology. We put God and His Word first and let them speak to us.

Which means, when we come to issues that you have an opinion on, either for or against, and I try to address them from Scripture, some of you will feel like I go too far while others of you will feel like I don't go far enough. I expect that. It's hard, but I accept that. At the end of the day though, I just want to be able to ask: was what was said Biblical? Because that's what we're going for: theology over ideology. If you're into that, this is the church for you.

So with all that said, look with me at Ps 106. We're here this morning because we have been chasing a certain phrase through the Psalms this summer, we've been looking for the words, "[Blessed is the man who...](#)" or "[Blessed are the people who...](#)" and then letting God fill in the blank and tell us what a blessed life looks like. Well, this morning we discover the joyful, blessed, happy, life involves persistently choosing justice and righteousness which mirror the character of God.

I'll say that again: the joyful life involves persistently choosing justice and righteousness which mirror the character of God

We get that from

**[Ps 106:3](#) Blessed are those who keep justice,
And he who does righteousness at all times!**

Psalm 106 is long, we don't have time to go through it all, but I can summarize it for you. The Psalm begins by praising God, look with me at

Ps 106:1 Praise the LORD!

Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for He is good!
For His mercy endures forever.

2 Who can utter the mighty acts of the LORD?
Who can declare all His praise?

And then we find our blessing in verse 3:

Ps 106:3 Blessed are those who keep justice,
And he who does righteousness at all times!

After this the Psalm goes on to recount the story of the history of Israel and the mercy of God. We learn about the people's unbelief, discontent, jealousy, idolatry, apostasy, compromise, rejection of God-ordained leadership, and embrace of paganism. It's not a pretty history. But we also see that God was always there, constantly watching over them, warning them when they began to wander and calling them back when they ran away.

The Psalmist sees this now and has two reactions, first, he marvels at the kindness of God, remember vs 1:

Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for He is good!
For His mercy endures forever.

And, he sees how much better it would have been, how blessed it would be, to never wander away from God in the first place, so he says, vs 3:

Ps 106:3 Blessed are those who keep justice,
And he who does righteousness at all times!

It's important to remember, this is a reaction. The Psalmist has seen life lived another way, and now he's saying this is the better path, this is the blessed path, this is the best way to live: **to keep justice and do righteousness at all times.**

Assuming that we also want to live a blessed life, to walk the better path, we need to begin by asking: what is justice? We're told to **keep** it, but what is it?

That seems like a silly question until you start to really think about it. What is justice? Many of us assume we know the answer but if I asked you to write it down for me, it might not flow as quickly or concisely as you expect. For most of us it's an undefined, generalized concept. It would be like walking into a restaurant and telling the waiter you want food.

Well, yes, he would say, you're in the right place, but which of the menu items, specifically, would you like us to bring to your table?

Food is what you want, it will satisfy the rumbling in your stomach, it will spike your blood sugar, it will provide you with nutrition, but do you want that food to take any specific form? Do you know what you really want to order?

By the time you leave this morning, I hope to give you an answer, a working definition of justice that is durable and broadly applicable; a definition that will help you navigate your personal life and public policy whether you're drawn to the left or the right politically, and most importantly, a definition that will shape, guide, and empower your own attempts to [keep justice](#) and [do righteousness](#) which is the whole reason we're on this subject this morning.

It turns out justice is not the transcendent universal ideal many people assume it to be. Philosophers have been working on a definition for thousands of years gradually reshaping and remaking it. Plato, the ancient Greek philosopher said there is a transcendent cosmic order that guides the world, a reality behind the shadows we live in, and justice meant being in line with that ultimate reality. To us his technical term there is a Form for justice that exists outside of us and we must come to discover it.

Then later in history Thomas Hobbes, the one Calvin's tiger is named for – you know that, right, that Calvin and Hobbes are named for John Calvin the theologian and Thomas Hobbes the philosopher?



Anyway, Thomas Hobbes completely contradicted Plato and said no, there is no concept of justice in the natural world, it doesn't exist without us, but we form a social contract with other human beings to form society and we only value justice as a means of self-preservation and self-protection, in other words we value the system functioning because the system helps us get what we want, and that's justice.

For thousands of years, right up to the very present, you've had philosophers arguing over whether justice is grounded in some ultimate truth of nature, or whether it is merely a socially useful construct. Is it grounded in rational thought or consensus? And they're still arguing about it! The fact of the matter is, if you ask, what is justice? You can find numerous, seemingly authoritative, but often conflicting answers including, "it's a popular store in the mall for tweenage girls."

In fact, that was the first hit on my Google search for Justice, followed by the US Department of Justice which owns justice.gov and then Merriam-Webster, the dictionary which said justice means fair treatment – but how do you determine what's fair? And who gets to make that determination? You see what I'm saying? Maybe justice isn't as obvious as you thought.

But here's something we can say for sure: justice involves deviation from a standard or ideal. There is a way things *should be*, and whether or not you experience justice depends

on how much your experience lines up with that standard of what things should be. This is why cries of injustice often sound like: that shouldn't have happened, things shouldn't be this way, this was wrong. There is an expected standard, and your experience deviated from it.

So, justice is a matter of alignment. The question being debated is, alignment with what? And here is where biblical *theology* cuts through all the competing *ideologies* and gives us a durable, dependable, satisfactory answer: God.

God is the final standard of all that is good, right, fair, and just in the world. Can you rightly accuse God of being unjust in any way, about any thing? No. Fairness, righteousness, justice, are central to His character and identity.

Moses sang a song of worship near the end of his life, reflecting on all he knew and experienced of God and he says:

Deuteronomy 32:1 "Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak;
And hear, O earth, the words of my mouth...
4 He is the Rock, His work is perfect;
For all His ways are justice,
A God of truth and without injustice;
Righteous and upright is He.

It's hard to miss what Moses is saying here, God is righteous, upright, without injustice, He is justice personified. Or, to say that another way, every act of injustice you observe, experience, or inflict, is simultaneously an act of rebellion against and departure from, the very nature of God.

So, if you're looking for a definition, may I suggest: *justice is seen in actions that properly represent God*. He is the standard; He is the ideal. Justice is simply trying to get our lives, experiences, public policies, business practices, and household rules, to properly image His nature and character.

Philosophers and academics may debate the nature of justice as a concept, but God is most concerned with it being seen and experienced in the world among people. Which means, religion, faith, spirituality, a walk with God, however you want to refer to it, has to be expressed in concrete actions.

So here's the truth that makes some social and religious conservatives uneasy: God does not want to just be praised with our lips, He does not want us to just pass a quiz on doctrine, He wants us to **do justice**. But when you talk like that, images of theological and cultural liberalism come flooding in and there's resistance and suspicion.

We have to figure out a way through that though because time after time in Scripture God says, I want more than just the praise of your lips, I want more than just you believing the right things about the right things, *I want to see you living this out*, looking like Me. and that

means caring about the poor, the weak, the vulnerable, and the oppressed, which again, to our current cultural ear, unfortunately sounds like saying – be a social and theological liberal.

But turn to Isaiah chapter 1 and listen to what God says to people who were actively worshipping Him, bringing sacrifices, celebrating religious holidays, and having prayer meetings, these were people who were doing the equivalent of coming to church on Sunday, He says:

Isaiah 1:12 “When you come to appear before Me,
Who has required this from your hand,
To trample My courts?
13 Bring no more futile sacrifices;
Incense is an abomination to Me.
The New Moons, the Sabbaths, and the calling of assemblies—
I cannot endure iniquity and the sacred meeting.
14 Your New Moons and your appointed feasts
My soul hates;
They are a trouble to Me,
I am weary of bearing them.
15 When you spread out your hands,
I will hide My eyes from you;
Even though you make many prayers,
I will not hear.
Your hands are full of blood.

16 “Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean;
Put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes.
Cease to do evil,
17 Learn to do good;
Seek justice,
Rebuke the oppressor;
Defend the fatherless,
Plead for the widow.

God says this is what real worship looks like, it’s living a life of action. Action anchored in the very character of God, reflecting Him to those in need. And then He says:

18 “Come now, and let us reason together,”
Says the LORD,
“Though your sins are like scarlet,
They shall be as white as snow;
Though they are red like crimson,
They shall be as wool.
19 If you are willing and obedient,
You shall eat the good of the land;

20 But if you refuse and rebel,
You shall be devoured by the sword";
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

Church, we cannot lose sight of the fact that he said that to people who were coming to worship and holding prayer meetings – those things are good, but *we've also got to live out our faith*, to **seek justice**. We see the same thing in the prophet Micah, another very famous section of Scripture dealing with this topic. Listen to his struggle

Micah 6:6 With what shall I come before the LORD,
And bow myself before the High God?
Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings,
With calves a year old?
7 Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,
Ten thousand rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
The fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

He's asking the question, what do I have to do for God? What do I need to give to Him? How do I worship? Here's the verse many of you already know, but we've probably forgotten the context, that it comes *after* Micah asks this question about how to worship. The answer is:

Micah 6:8 He has shown you, O man, what is good;
And what does the LORD require of you
But to do justly,
To love mercy,
And to walk humbly with your God?

What does God want? He wants you to pursue justice, to show His character to others. Worship is not just about our private, personal, walk with God, or a moment we experience in the sanctuary – our walk in private must also be manifest in public as concern for justice.

Jesus said the same thing in a confrontation with the religious conservatives of His day. He criticized the Pharisees, a religious denomination of sorts – they were rock solid in their knowledge of Scripture, they were morally conservative, they wrote tithe checks regularly and religiously, but they were still missing something. Jesus said:

Matthew 23:23 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cumin, and have neglected the weightier [matters] of the law: **justice** and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone.

They were super diligent about their giving, but they neglected justice and Jesus said **woe to you** for that! So here's the crazy thing: today there are a lot of people who think if you're all about justice and mercy you're probably liberal in your views about God and theology and if you're serious about God and theology you're not serious about justice and mercy!

Church, we've got a problem here! But I think the root of the problem is: *what do we mean by justice?* Who defines the term? If we let the cultural forces and social agendas of our day decide what justice is, there's a very good chance it will be divisive in the church and community because, as we showed earlier, there is no final consensus on what justice is or why it's necessary.

And Hobbes is right: there is no natural reason for justice in a strictly natural, as opposed to supernatural, world. An evolutionary view of the world is inherently unjust and **MUST** be so because, by default, one segment of the species is always evolving, becoming better adapted and therefore thriving. In evolution someone is always developing an 'unfair' adaptation and advantage. And once that happens, the best thing to do is get rid of the weaker, former versions of the species so they don't continue to propagate and hold back progress.

That is logically consistent but you probably find it morally repugnant. Why? If you believe in macro-evolutionary origins for the world why do you believe in justice, especially for the weak and powerless? Sure, they're under-resourced and dominated, but isn't that how the system works? Isn't that how we all move forward? Evolution encourages the survival of the fittest.

Biblical theology on the other hand, says care for all, especially the weak and vulnerable *because* they are created in the image of God and are objects of His concern. Remember, justice reflects who He is.

How much better is it to recognize a generous, merciful God as our Creator and standard for justice, and to accept our role as His ambassadors seeking to project His nature and character into our relationships and communities by **keeping justice** and **doing righteousness always**. Remember Ps 106 said:

**Ps 106:3 Blessed are those who keep justice,
And he who does righteousness at all times!**

There is a blessing that comes when you reflect God's nature, a blessing to you and to those around you. But, how is this supposed to work out? How do we keep justice and do what is right at all times when there are so many things going wrong in the world?

I'll share with you two things I find in Scripture. First, there is always a prioritization of proximity, what I mean is, Scripture often encourages us to tend to the needs of those closest to us, so first our family, then our church, then the community. But, second, Scripture is also full of examples of strangers who were taken in, shown mercy, and given rest.

In fact, that's the stunning turn of the parable of the Good Samaritan- he took care of someone who would have been considered on another team socially, from a different tribe,

not 'one of my people.' Jesus consistently ministered to people who did not follow Him and were from outside His circle, sometimes that led to their salvation, but for many it did not.

So, it seems, the testimony of Scripture is that justice involves looking after those closest to you, while also reaching out to help those outside your circle, and advocating for what is good, right, and true, simply because it's good, right, and true - that it reflects God's nature bringing Him glory and making the world more like it should be.

In other words, there is room for each Christian, and each church to discern how and where God wants them to be involved in working for justice, and that might not look the same on the surface, the way you pursue justice and the way I pursue justice, or the way our church pursues justice and another church does it may look different *on the surface*, but whatever happens should still reflect the heart of God, because, after all, He's the standard for justice.

Now having said all of this, let us also remember that God is patient and merciful as well. And that is good. Because if He demanded complete justice, none of us could stand. None of us is completely righteous, even those among us who care the most about social, criminal, economic, political, environmental or racial justice. We all have areas of life we're proud of, and areas we're ashamed of. No matter how much you mirror the character of God in some areas of life there's another area where you're a mess. So, God shows us mercy.

And to bring us mercy God sent his own Son to experience injustice. Jesus was a refugee who crossed borders as a toddler to escape political oppression in his homeland. He grew up, and faced prejudice. He was wrongly arrested, received an unjust trial, and was wrongfully executed. He suffered the worst injustices that human beings can pour out on one another in order that He might save us from what we do to each other and ourselves.

So, where do we go from here? I think we need to walk out thinking about two things: first, biblical justice is a reflection of the character of God, and second, there is a blessing for those who persistently choose to seek it. So, if you are the kind of person who leans into issues of justice, feels stirred up by them, I suggest you critically evaluate - where and how does this intersect with my faith? Is love for and obedience to God driving my concern for justice, or is it something else? How can I replace cultural outrage with Godly concern?

And if you're the kind of person who bristles at the word justice, I suggest you critically evaluate, why? What are you reacting to? It's probably a response to a cultural and political ideology you disagree with, which might be legitimate. But are you sure? What does your theology say about the issue? God is a god of justice and compassionate concern. You may disagree with the way 'justice' is being pursued by another group or party, but where is the heart of God in the matter and how can you best represent that?

When it comes to the issue of justice we all need to realize it's an important concept because it is anchored, defined, and demonstrated in the character of God and therefore it must be evident in the lives of those He is redeeming and remaking in His image. So let's pray and ask for God's help with this otherwise impossible task today.



Sermon Application and Discussion Questions

Studies in the Psalms Keys to the Joyful Life 7

Summary: The joyful life involves persistently choosing justice and righteousness which mirror the character of God.

- Are you more likely to lean into conversations regarding justice, or pull back?
 - Why? What does “justice” mean to you?
 - What good experiences have you had with “justice?” What concerns do you have with cultural pursuit of “justice?”

- What do the following verses teach us about justice? Do they emphasize just actions, or thoughts, or both?
 - **Ps 82:3** Defend the poor and fatherless;
Do justice to the afflicted and needy.
4 Deliver the poor and needy;
Free them from the hand of the wicked.

 - **Phil 4:8** Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things *are* noble, whatever things *are* just, whatever things *are* pure, whatever things *are* lovely, whatever things *are* of good report, if *there is* any virtue and if *there is* anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things. 9 The things which you learned and received and heard and saw in me, these do, and the God of peace will be with you.

- What are the obligations of judges, rulers, and leaders regarding justice?
 - See Exodus 23:3, 6; Deuteronomy 16:19-20; Lev 19:15
 - Why do these weakest sections of society suffer the most when justice recedes?

- I found this quote in the Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology while studying for this sermon: “Justice knows no boundaries. It invades the private lives of Christians to inquire about whether we are making money with justice and spending it with compassion. It questions whether the concerns of the poor and disenfranchised are our concerns and whether we are applying ourselves where we can make a difference. Justice is provocative and demanding.”
 - Does justice feel provocative and demanding to you? Why?
 - Where are you most likely to build boundaries in your life?

- Where do you see a greater need for justice? How should understanding justice as God’s character affect your approach to the issue?