



JESUS & JUSTICE | THE JUSTICE BRINGER

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Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was fond of quoting the prophet Amos channeling the words of God. God says, I despise the sight and the sound of your worship, if it is not accompanied by justice. Therefore, "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream." God pictures justice like a thundering river, coursing its way down a mountainside. That's quite a different image than the one of Lady Justice portrayed in Roman art. The Roman personification of justice wears a blindfold representing impartiality. In one hand, she holds a sword representing authority, and in the other she placidly holds a set of scales, as she weighs competing claims of guilt and innocence. I would suggest that those two images are compatible with one another, the Biblical and the Roman, but it's clear that in the Biblical understanding of justice, justice is not about merely maintaining the status quo. No, justice is a positive, charging, proactive pursuit of that which is good and true in order to set things right. The God revealed in the Bible is a God who says, *I love justice*. God is passionately committed to justice, and he will hold us as human beings responsible for doing justice, and bringing justice in our own lives as well.

Last week, we began a new sermon series, which we have entitled *Jesus & Justice*, and with this series, we have jumped into the deep end of the pool. Some people have questioned whether or not I have lost my mind because the topic of justice is inherently complicated. It's potentially contentious, and it's personally challenging. Yet, while all that may be true, it remains the fact that justice is a central aspect of the Christian hope; therefore, it's critically important for us to understand justice from a specifically Biblical point of view.

Over the next several weeks, we're going to consider what Jesus had to say about justice in the gospels. There's no better place for us to start than with what you could call Jesus' first inaugural address. The Gospel of Luke tells us that when Jesus first launched his public career, he began teaching in the synagogues throughout Galilee, and then his fame spread throughout the surrounding region. Then on one especially memorable occasion, Jesus attends the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth, and he chooses that moment, in that place, to reveal his identity and his mission in dramatic fashion. This passage is so important and foundational that we'll take a look at it for a second time this week in more depth. If you'd like, I'd encourage you to open up a Bible to Luke 4. I'll be reading v.14-22.

¹⁴And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and a report about him went out through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵And he taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all.

¹⁶And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. ¹⁷And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written,

¹⁸“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

²⁰And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹And he began to say to them, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” ²²And all spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth. And they said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?”

This is God’s word. It’s trustworthy, and it’s true, and it’s given to us in love.

Recap Of Previous Sermon

As we discussed last week, a synagogue service in the first century would typically involve a reading from the Torah, one of the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures, often followed by a reading from one of the prophets. After the reading, any qualified person could instruct the audience. Luke tells us that, “as was his custom”—so this had become part of Jesus’ regular custom at this point—he indicated that he had something to say. They hand him the scroll of Isaiah, and he deliberately opens it up to Isaiah 61. He finds the exact spot that he’s looking for, and after he reads it, he hands it back to the attendant and sits down. That is the posture that a rabbi in the first century would take before instructing his students. The first words out of Jesus’ mouth are, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” The significance of Jesus’ words would not have been lost on that first century audience. “By evoking that text, Isaiah 61, at the very beginning of his ministry, Jesus is indicating that he is the one who has been sent in the power of the Spirit to proclaim good news and to usher in God’s reign of justice. He is claiming to be the anointed one, which is what the word “messiah” means.

If you weren’t here last week, I would encourage you to go back and perhaps listen to the sermon because that initial sermon will serve as an introduction to the series as a whole. All of these sermons are going to build up on top of one another. It’ll be very difficult for any one of them to stand completely on their own because so many of these ideas are interrelated. One of the reasons why the previous sermon is so important is because I addressed a number of foundational questions. We have to start with these types of questions. What is justice? Why do we need it? How can we get it?

Let me provide just a quick recap. What is justice? I began by suggesting that we need to make a distinction between First Order Justice and Second Order Justice. Second Order Justice comes into play when there’s been a violation of First Order Justice. That’s when we might talk about restorative justice or retributive justice. That’s the criminal justice system. The Bible has something to say about that too, but my focus will be on primary justice, which is all about our relationships with one another. From the standpoint of the Bible, justice is grounded in the concept of rights.

Every human being is created in the image of God and therefore, imbued with inestimable value. Therefore, every human being possesses an inherent right to be treated in accordance with their worth—no matter who they are, no matter where they're from, no matter what they are or are not capable of, no matter what they've ever done, or what they believe, no matter the color of their skin, or how much money they have in their pockets. Therefore, from the Bible's point of view, to do justice means to give each and every person his or her right, to treat each and every person according to their worth.

If that's what justice is, why do we need it? Quite simply because this is what we were made for. There's no way that we as human beings could ever flourish apart from it, and that is why justice is closely connected to the concept of *shalom*. The Hebrew word *shalom* is often translated as peace, but a far better word might be the word flourishing because *shalom* does not merely refer to the absence of stress, or conflict, or hostility, but more positively, it refers to the presence of wholeness, harmony, and delight in all of our relationships—first and foremost with God, and then secondarily, with one another, with our physical environment, and even within ourselves. *Shalom*, in other words, is the way things are supposed to be.

We all know that justice has been broken. We don't experience *shalom*, so where can true justice be found? In many ways, it's going to take several weeks to unpack this, but in short, the answer is, true, lasting justice and *shalom* can only be found in and through Jesus. He is the ultimate justice bringer. There's no justice without peace, nor any peace without justice. If we have that initial framework in place, then we can drill down on some of the specifics that are before us in this passage.

Who Has Jesus Come To Deliver?

The questions that I want to ask are who, how and why? If Jesus is the ultimate justice bringer, then who exactly has he come to aid? How does he go about doing it? Why does it matter? First off, who has Jesus come to aid? Jesus declares at Nazareth that he has been sent in the power of the Spirit to proclaim good news to the poor, to the captives, to the blind, and to the oppressed. Therefore, we need to ask, who exactly is Jesus talking about? This is where people make one of two mistakes. Some people say that Jesus is talking about spiritual conditions, so these are simply metaphors. The poor are the poor in spirit. The captives are those who are held in bondage to sin and death. The blind are those who are unable to perceive spiritual truth, and the oppressed are those who experience the negative consequences of living in a fallen world as a result of humanity's rebellion against God. Then there's others who say, oh, no, no, no, no! Jesus isn't talking about spiritual conditions. He means what he says. He's talking about material conditions. These aren't metaphors. The poor are those who are living in poverty. The captives are those who are in prison. The blind are those who are physically unable to see, and the oppressed are those who are experiencing suffering, abuse, and unjust treatment at the hands of those in power.

Which one is it? Is Jesus talking about spiritual conditions or material conditions? The answer is: Yes!. He's talking about both. The Bible never divides human beings into parts. You can't separate the spiritual from the material because we are human beings. We are one. We are ensouled bodies, and embodied souls. The Bible never

divides us into parts. Jesus is concerned with the whole person, and therefore, you can't focus on one to the exclusion of another. Jesus' younger brother, James (who I like to call little Jimmy), little Jimmy understood this. If you turn to James 2:15-16, James writes, "If a brother or sister [meaning a fellow believer in Christ] is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled,' without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?" You can't separate the two. The spiritual and the material go together.

Jesus' intended audience becomes even more clear when you consider the original background of Isaiah, and the first century context into which Jesus himself was speaking. When Isaiah first wrote these words, contained in Isaiah 61, the poor captives were God's people who had been carried away into exile in Babylon, because of their disobedience and sin. Just as Isaiah had previously foretold, Jerusalem was destroyed. God's people lost everything. They were carried away into captivity. But now, Isaiah is announcing the good news that the poor captives have been forgiven, and therefore, the captives will be set free. The oppressed will be released, and they'll be able to return home. Then when Jesus picks up these words, in the first century, they would have taken on a different kind of meaning. In the first century, God's people had already returned from their captivity. They were already living at home in Jerusalem, and the surrounding area. Yet they still felt like they were living in exile because once again, they were suffering under the iron fist of foreign oppression. What were they praying for? They were praying that God would release them from the oppression of Rome, and that God would exact vengeance on their enemies.

Strolling forward to our own day, likewise, we too may feel like we're living in exile. Maybe we feel like we are still cut off from life as God intends it, in both a spiritual and material sense. We may feel like we're alienated from God because of our own spiritual rebellion or failure, or we may be suffering from physical maladies, financial hardships, broken relationships, or unjust treatment. The point is that when Jesus takes these words of Isaiah and makes them his own, he is suggesting that he is fulfilling the words of Isaiah in the deepest, fullest, most comprehensive sense. He has come to bring release from both physical oppression and from the ultimate bondage of sin, evil, and death. He's come to free us from both the material and the spiritual conditions that hold us down and hinder us from experiencing the kind of flourishing that God intends for us as his beloved creatures. In fact, the word "release," as it's used by Luke throughout his writings, refers often, not only to freedom, but also to forgiveness. The two are interrelated. Jesus has come to set us free, and he's already done everything that is necessary in order to secure our flourishing through his death, and his resurrection, although we will not experience that flourishing fully and finally until Jesus returns and ushers in his new creation.

If all that's true, what does that mean for us? For Jesus, the spiritual and the material went together. They were inseparable. He addressed both spiritual and material needs, though he recognized the ultimacy of our spiritual need. Why is that? Think about it like this. Let's say everything else in your life is as you would want it to be: You're rich, free, and healthy, rather than poor, blind, and oppressed. Even if you were rich, free, and healthy, but your relationship with God was off, you'd still be lost—eternally lost. While Jesus cares about both the spiritual and the material conditions of

our life, there is an ultimacy to our spiritual condition, because unless we are restored in our relationship to God, we're lost. Therefore, he addresses both, but there's an ultimacy to our spiritual need. As for Jesus, so for us. As Christians, we're called to address both material and spiritual needs of those around us, while recognizing the ultimacy of the spiritual.

The theologian Christopher Wright explains why he prefers to use the term ultimacy, rather than primacy or priority. He puts it like this,

“Priority means it is the most important, most urgent, thing to be done first, and everything else must take second, third or fourth place. But the difficulty with this is that (1) it is not always possible or desirable in the immediate situation, and (2) it does not even reflect the actual practice of Jesus. Rather, almost any starting point can be appropriate, depending possibly on what is the most pressing or obvious need. We can enter the circle of missional response at any point on the circle of human need. But ultimately we must not rest content until we have included within our own missional response the wholeness of God’s mission response to the human predicament—and that of course includes the good news of Christ, the cross and resurrection, the forgiveness of sin, the gift of eternal life that is offered to men and women through our witness to the gospel and the hope of God’s new creation. That is why I speak of ultimacy rather than primacy. Mission may not always begin with evangelism. But mission that does not ultimately include declaring the Word and the name of Christ, the call to repentance, and faith and obedience has not completed its task. It is defective mission, not holistic mission.”

The spiritual and the material, a ministry of Word and deed, proclaiming the good news and doing justice, always go together. Here's the good news. If Jesus came to set us free from both the material conditions and the spiritual conditions that prevent us from flourishing as God intends, then do you know what that means? It means that Jesus came for you, no matter who you are. Jesus' missional response includes you. He came to rescue you.

How Will He Do It?

If that's who Jesus is talking about, then how does this actually play out? What does Jesus actually do in practice? We know that he proclaimed the good news. Chapter one tells us that he announced the kingdom of God. He said, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God, God's reign of justice, is here." It's finally arrived. It's drawn near. It is confronting you now as a present reality because it is present in the person of Jesus. Matthew 4:23 tells us that Jesus went about the whole region of Galilee proclaiming the good news of the kingdom. Though it may be difficult for us to understand, or perhaps even to believe, Jesus became famous for healing people of their diseases and of all kinds of infirmities, including physical blindness, and of releasing them from demonic oppression. But Jesus' healings always operated on two levels. On the one hand, Jesus literally did heal people of their physical blindness, but these healings always pointed beyond themselves at the same time. Even Jesus would use the image of blindness as a symbol, to point to our inability to perceive the truth of who God is, another condition from which we need to be delivered by his grace. As

to Jesus' care for the poor and the impoverished, we know that on at least two occasions, Jesus miraculously fed large crowds with food. This wasn't a regular feature of his ministry. He used that occasion to teach people that one day God would satisfy every human need. Jesus taught that ultimately, he *is* the bread of life. He *is* the living water. He *is* the light of the world. Ultimately, he is the one who can satisfy our hunger and thirst. He's the only one that can truly illumine our darkness.

In practice, throughout Jesus's ministry, he addressed both the spiritual and material conditions of human beings, but he recognized the ultimacy of the spiritual and here is perhaps one interesting example of that. Jesus declares at Nazareth, that he has come to set at liberty the captives. Yet, as far as we know, throughout the course of his public career, he didn't actually literally release any prisoners, not even those who had been incarcerated for religious or political reasons. He didn't even release his own cousin, John the Baptist, the one who prepared the way for the coming of Jesus. No, he left him in prison, and later John was beheaded. According to Matthew 11, as he's languishing there in prison, even John began to have doubts about Jesus, so he sends messengers to Jesus to ask, *are you the one who is to come or should we look for another?* Imagine the disappointment and the disillusionment that even John the Baptist must have experienced to ask such a question. Everyone thought that the messiah would rescue them by pouring out God's anger and wrath on their enemies, but Jesus wasn't doing the expected things of a deliverer. He didn't stage a coup. He didn't raise an army. He didn't drive the Romans out of Palestine and make Israel a great nation again. Jesus sends those messengers back to John, and he says, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me." That is his word back to John: "Blessed is the one who is not offended by me."

Why would people be offended by Jesus? His words and actions didn't fit their expectations. He didn't live the ascetic lifestyle of a spiritual guru, nor the activist lifestyle of a political revolutionary. That's why if you keep reading to the end of Luke 4, you'll see that the initial enthusiasm that Jesus receives at the synagogue in Nazareth, quickly turns to outrage because as he's giving this sermon in the synagogue, he explains that he has come to extend God's favor not only to his own people, but even to their perceived cultural, political, and national enemies. That, of course, was more than they could take. We all love the idea of justice. We love the idea that God is a God of justice as long as that means that God is going to bring justice for *us*. But what if that means that God is going to bring justice for *them* too, whoever "they" may be?

Why Does It Matter?

Why does all this matter? We long for justice. We ache for *shalom*. We want God to make things right again, but here's the problem as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn put it years ago, and as we all know from personal experience. It would be so much easier if we could just separate the good people from the bad people. It'd be so much easier if we could just put the victims of injustice who need to be rescued over here, and we can put the perpetrators of injustice who need to pay for what they've done over

here. But it doesn't work that way because the dividing line between justice and injustice doesn't fall between us and them. The dividing line between justice and injustice doesn't pass between different classes, or between different races, or between different political parties. No, the line dividing good and evil cuts right through the middle of the human heart. The dividing line between good and evil passes through every human heart, and that's what makes this so personal. Because when we're talking about justice, God's justice, we're asking that God would bring his perfect judgment to bear on this fallen world, but that also includes us.

The Yale theologian Miroslav Volf, who is a native of Croatia, said that he used to wrestle with the idea of God's judgment and condemnation, the idea that God would be wrathful, or angry towards the world's evil and injustice, because it seems so incompatible with God's love. But upon further reflection, Volf realized that he could never believe in a God who *wasn't* angry at the world's evil and injustice. He puts it like this,

"I used to think that wrath was unworthy of God. Isn't God love? Shouldn't divine love be beyond wrath? God is love, and God loves every person and every creature. That's exactly why God is wrathful against some of them. My last resistance to the idea of God's wrath was a casualty of the war in the former Yugoslavia, the region from which I come. According to some estimates, 200,000 people were killed and over 3 million were displaced. My villages and cities were destroyed, my people shelled day in and day out, some of them brutalized beyond imagination, and I could not imagine God not being angry.

Or think of Rwanda in the last decade of the past century, where 800,000 people were hacked to death in one hundred days! How did God react to such carnage? By doting on the perpetrators in a grandparently fashion? By refusing to condemn the bloodbath but instead affirming the perpetrators' basic goodness? Wasn't God fiercely angry with them?

Though I used to complain about the indecency of the idea of God's wrath, I came to think that I would have to rebel against a God who wasn't wrathful at the sight of the world's evil. God isn't wrathful in spite of being love. God is wrathful because God is love."

God's wrath is not a feeling, it is an action. It is God's settled opposition to evil and injustice. It is the demonstration of his commitment to make things right. But once we get to a point where we can accept the appropriateness of God's judgment, we can't leave it out there reserved for others. No, we have to bring it home, but that's a terrifying prospect. Volf continues to write,

"I originally resisted the notion of a wrathful God because I dreaded being that wrath's target; I still do. I knew I couldn't just direct God's wrath against others, as if it were a weapon I could aim at targets I particularly detested. It's God's wrath, not mine, the wrath of the one and impartial God, lover of all humanity. If I want it to fall on evildoers, I must let it fall on myself—when I deserve it."

That is a terrifying thought, and that is why it is so important for us to understand that Jesus does something shocking and completely unexpected during his sermon at the synagogue in Nazareth. Luke, of course, is merely giving us a summary of everything that Jesus did and said. We know that in addition to quoting Isaiah 61, Jesus inserts a verse from Isaiah 58:6 in order to emphasize that he has come to set at liberty those who are oppressed. But as he reads Isaiah 61:1-2, when he gets to the second verse, he stops short. He fails to read the second line of the second verse. Isaiah says, "The Lord has anointed me...to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And then it goes on to say, "And the day of vengeance of our God." "The Lord has anointed me...to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God." Jesus quotes the first part, but not the second. He doesn't speak of God's vengeance. Why not? Because that is not what he has come to do. Not yet. Despite what everyone might have thought, including even John the Baptist, Jesus has not come to *bring* God's vengeance, against God's enemies, but rather to *bear* it. He has not come to pour out the cup of God's anger and wrath on all those who have committed injustices, but rather to drink the cup himself. He has not come to inflict punishment, but to absorb it on the cross. That is what Jesus has come to do.

Some people might ask, but still, why doesn't God hold perpetrators of injustice to account now? Why doesn't he do something? Trust me. One day, he will. One day he will restore true justice. He will establish *shalom*. He will put right everything that ever went wrong. Justice will roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream. So you ask, what is he waiting for? There's only one answer to that question. The only reason why he delays is because of his kindness. The only reason why he's holding back is because of his patience because he is giving you more time. He's giving you and me and others like us more time because of his love, because of his kindness, because of his patience, to respond to him, and to receive the favor that he has secured for us through the cross. That is why he can proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. The year of the Lord's grace. The cross is God's grace to you. He is waiting for you to receive it, but he will not wait forever. If you wait until that terrible day when he does bring his justice fully and finally to bear on this world, then it'll be too late, which means that now is the time to respond. Now is the time to throw yourself upon the favor that he has secured for you by his substitutionary death on the cross in your place, and then to join him in his work of anticipating the justice that he will bring in our actions now, by proclaiming the good news and by doing justice, for the poor, for the captives, for the blind, and the oppressed, whoever they may be.

Let me pray for us.

Father, we thank you that Jesus is the ultimate justice bringer who has come to bring us release from both those material conditions as well as those ultimate spiritual conditions that hinder us from experiencing the flourishing that you intend for us as human beings. We thank you that we are part of his intended audience, the recipients of his grace and favor. Help us to receive it for ourselves and to become part of his restorative work as we proclaim the good news, and do justice in Jesus' name. We pray for his sake. Amen.