



“The Wisdom of Doing Justice”

Text: Proverbs 29:2-7

a sermon by Kevin Fleming

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If you have ever parented - or if you are trained as an educator - or if you are just a keen observer - you know that there are certain “stages” through which children move. They are signs on the journey to adulthood that mark the progress - or the lack thereof. They can be times of celebration - the first steps - or indications that something more may be needed.

One of the stages that catches adults off guard is when a young child - of about three or four - says, for the first time, “that’s not fair.” It loses some of the charm when the children reaches their teen years and you’ve heard it approximately 177,922 times over their growing up. Still, it is a marker in the young child’s life - that there is a sense of right and wrong - the emerging evidence of a conscience - the first glimmer of the more fully human person the child is to become.

That sense of right and wrong - of fair and unfair - is the beginning of our lifelong struggle with justice. We are very good at knowing when *our own* rights and entitlements are being impacted. We sometimes have a little bit of a challenge knowing when the rights and entitlements *of others* are being impinged.

Justice plays a significant role in being a Christian person. Professor Paul Louis Metzger, of the Multnomah Biblical Seminary in Portland, Oregon (no bastion of liberal thought), writes:

Biblical justice involves making individuals, communities, and the cosmos whole, by upholding both goodness and impartiality. It stands at the center of true religion, according to James, who says that the kind of “religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.” (James 1:27) Earlier Scripture says, “The righteous care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern.” (Prov. 29:7)¹

God did not create a broken, divided, and fractured world. God created the world in a complete wholeness - no hint of imperfection or damage - and this is still the way God wants the creation to be - whole and complete - a world in peace - which is to say, a world restored. Central to that restoration is the work of justice.

The Reverend Dr. Mark Achtemeier, formerly of the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary, reminds us:

From its earliest beginnings the Presbyterian and Reformed tradition has been deeply involved with ministries of justice. In the 16th century John Calvin's Geneva developed programs for public health, employment, and care of refugees and indigent persons...John Calvin, commenting on Genesis 1:28 - "God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." - [Calvin]" said, "Any inequality which is contrary to His arrangement is nothing else than a corruption of nature which proceeds from sin."²

Justice flows from God's heart and character.³ Justice is what God is all about. And God calls God's people to be about justice, too.

Now, if we take the Biblical language of justice, we begin to see a little clearer.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, we find the word *chesed*. *Chesed* is an act of loving kindness. A neighbor is sick and you take some soup. You help someone in the store. You feed a stray animal. This is *chesed*. It is bringing a bit of wholeness to a broken situation.

There is another word, *tzedakah*, which is donating money - a portion of what we have received from God - to benefit those who have not been so blessed. Giving money to the poor, or to a non-profit that seeks to bring wholeness, or supporting the church, is an act of *tzedakah*. It was Moses Maimonides, the Sephardic Jewish philosopher who became one of the most prolific and influential Torah scholars of the Middle Ages, who taught us that the greatest act of *tzedakah* is to enable another person to become independent and self-supporting.

The final word to consider is *tzedek*. *Tzedek* challenges us to go even further. *Tzedek* instructs us to change the systems of injustice and inequality that keeps some out, that prevent some from success, that block some from the fullness of blessing and wholeness.

Loving kindness - financial support - systemic change. These are Biblical ideas. How do we bring them to life today?

Let's go to a baseball game.



Suppose we are at a baseball game and we're trying to watch. Some of us have an easier time of it. If you happen to be male, white, middle-class, educated, and employed, you get to have a pretty good view of the game.



The reality is that the situation probably looks more like this. This is the very image of privilege. This is why when other speak of injustice, or challenge the way things are, or protest in the streets - this is why we have a hard time understanding.



Now, if we say that everything should be equal and we all should have an equal chance, it looks like this. Because some of us start out with blessings and benefits that others do not enjoy, equality actually keeps things unequal.



What we need to be striving toward - at least for a while - is equity. If some need supports and advantages that others do not need, we need to be doing what we can to be sure that everyone can see the game.



But what we really need to be trying to figure out is this: This is what God is calling us to do. God is calling us to break down the walls that keep some in and leave others out. God is calling us to undo past wrongs and make a new start that is just for all involved - fair beyond any fairness seen or known thus far. God is calling us to revalue the image of God in which all people are created and ensure that all God's children have the fullness of life they were created to enjoy.

There was a time when people thought that the church's only purpose was to "save souls." The truth of the matter is that is not a very accurate description of what the Bible says Jesus came to do. When Jesus went to his home synagogue and preached, Luke tells us that he read from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free,
and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. - Luke 4:18-19

That's a lot more than an interior piety. That's a whole lot more than the promise of heaven. That sounds like doing justice - tearing down dividing walls - ensuring that everyone can be all that God created them to be. That sounds like restoring the world to the original state in which it was created.

“The righteous know the rights of the poor;
the wicked have no such understanding.” (Prov. 29:7)

We might put it this way:

“The righteous care about justice for the poor -
care about fairness for the oppressed,
take action on behalf of the subjugated,
bring hope to the demoralized...”

This is the work of God’s people - fueled by the love which flows from
God’s own heart - inspired by God’s own example.

There is wisdom in doing justice. It is the way of God - a method of
living in connection to God - a way of bringing the Kingdom of God
into the here-and-now of our world, knowing full well that God will
bring that Kingdom to its fullness in God’s own time.

Let us take on the holy work of tearing down dividing walls and
breaking through barriers.

Let us establish true justice in the land.

Let us respect and honor the image of God in our neighbor and let
us do what is right, and fair, and just.

For now and evermore. Amen.

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- 1) Metzger, Paul Louis. *What Is Biblical Justice?* Christianity Today, September 20, 2010
 - 2) Achtemeier, Mark. *Presbyterians Today*. www.presbyterianmission.org/what-we-believer/biblical-justice/
 - 3) Metzger, Paul Louis. *What Is Biblical Justice?* Christianity Today, September 20, 2010



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