

Sermon Series: The Gospel & Justice

#1 What is “doing justice”? – Micah 6:6-8

Imagine that you could **invite one person** from Biblical history to share dinner at your table (with the exception of Jesus) who would it be?”

I’m guessing, someone like the **prophet Amos** would not be top of the list? Imagine just before dinner, having to: hide the silverware, stash the fine wines, remove the expensive artwork from the walls, clear your browser history, and lock up your expenditure records!

Some people think about sermons on justice like dinner with Amos – not much fun. Something to endure. “If we keep our heads down, the whole thing might pass quickly”.

But what if I were to tell you that understanding God’s view of justice is **critical** for understanding your faith and following Jesus!

Q. How was “doing justice” talked about in your church experiences of the past? What examples do you have in the past of Christians who actively sought to change inequity and injustice in the world?

[Take a moment to share with your neighbour]

In my own background, I had a variety of examples from Christians...

- Some Christians said, “**Evangelism is the priority** – acting for justice is ok, so long as it helps people to be personally converted to follow Jesus.”
- Others seem to go the other direction and **changed their theology**, even avoiding telling people about Jesus, promoting the Church as just an alternative social justice agency.
- Others still, **walked away** from Christianity believing “religions” are **the cause** of injustice and acts of violence in the world today.

Past learnings and examples will have shaped your view of Jesus and justice. But it’s important to let the God of the bible challenge and shape us.

My first point today then, is...

1. **Jesus came to usher in the age of “doing justice”** (Luke 4:18-21)

We often think about “bringing people to justice”, but the Bible proclaims that ushers in the age of “living justly”. Jesus identified Himself this way:

“Unrolling the scroll, [Jesus] found the place where it is written: The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners.” (Luke 4:17-18)

After reading the passage aloud, Jesus “...rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant [saying], ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing’” (Luke 4:20-21).

Jesus claimed publicly that he was the **redeeming figure** prophecied by Isaiah long before (Isaiah 42:1-7) – Luke is telling us that Jesus, God’s “anointed”, is the **embodiment of God’s justice and love**. The righteous one God sent into the world came to live **justly** on our behalf.

I was fortunate to know the late Francis (Frank) I. Anderson, an acclaimed Old Testament scholar. He would graciously sit through my sermons in my younger years. He would come to me after and offer sincere encouragement and advice. He said to me after hearing me preach from the Book of Job¹,

“Steve, people love to read the Book of Job to learn about God and suffering, or about how Satan works. But few are interested in Job as a **an example of how God wants people to live**. Frank said, “In Job’s mind, to omit to do good to any fellow human, of whatever rank or class, would be a grievous offence to God.”

We could say Jesus came as the fulfilment as the **ideal Israelite**.

Some Christians like to think of the goals in the Luke 4 manifesto as **metaphorical**. But Jesus acted these out in just living and **called his followers** to do likewise with God’s help.

It’s a curious phrase – to “do justice”. But as we’ll see next, it’s an active thing.

So, my first point today is that **Jesus ushers in the age of “doing justice”**. Following Jesus includes **learning to live justly**. But **what is “doing justice”**?

2. **Loving others is “doing justice”** (Micah 6:6-8)

¹ Frank was the author of an excellent commentary on that book

Micah 6:8 is an important statement for all God's people about how God wants us to live. Micah² was a contemporary of Amos, rebuking Judah for its dishonesty and idolatry. He insists that **loving others is "doing justice"**:

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?

At first glance, "do justice" and "love mercy" **appear to be two different things**. But they are **not**.³

- The term for "mercy" or "kindness" is the Hebrew word *chesedh*, which we know is God's unconditional grace and compassion.
- The word for "justice" is the Hebrew term *mishpat*. Bruce Waltke says, "*mishpat* puts the emphasis on the **action**, while *chesedh* puts it on the **attitude** or motive behind the action."

To walk in the ways of God, then, is to **do justice**, motivated by **merciful love**.

This word *mishpat* occurs more than 200 times in the Hebrew Old Testament. It means to **treat people equitably**. We often think of "justice" in the Bible is punishment for wrongdoing. But "doing justice" more often means **generously working for equity** where people are pressed down – **promoting wellbeing** and wholeness where pain and suffering is the norm.

Mishpat often means **giving people their "due" or their "rights"**. Some examples include: Leviticus 24:22; Deuteronomy 18:3; and Proverbs 31:9.

You can see this connection between **attitude** and **action**, between loving mercy and doing justice, in Zechariah 7:9-10, where God says to Israel...

Administer true justice, show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the orphan, the immigrant, or the poor (Zech. 7:9-10).

Those **four groups** mentioned in the passage [the widows, orphans, immigrants, and the poor] had **no social power**. Most were just days away from starvation when tough times were upon the nation.

² One of the Twelve Minor Prophets of the Hebrew Bible with Isaiah, Amos and Hosea. From Moresheth-Gath, in southwest Judah. He prophesied during the reigns of kings Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah of Judah to Jerusalem of the future destruction of Jerusalem and Samaria, the destruction and then future restoration of the Judean state, and he rebuked the people of Judah for dishonesty and idolatry.

³ Peter Cragie says, "Although we may learn deeply from each of the three parts of the prophet's message, it is the collective whole which is most vital"

In cities around the world today these might include **refugees**, under-employed **migrants**, the **homeless**, many **single parents**, and some **elderly**.

It was understood by the prophets that people motivated by the love of God will never rest till inequity is fully addressed.

My second point, then, is to see that the Bible views “doing justice” as **love** and generosity **in action**, especially for victims of inequity – that they may have **their due**, their God-given rights, as those made in the image of God.

3. Exemplars of “doing justice”

A contemporary of C.S. Lewis, yet hardly ever quoted by preachers because she was **female** and **controversial** (despite being an inspiration to Lewis himself), **Dorothy L Sayers** was an agitator for “doing justice” through her academic and literary skills. Her **re-telling of the Gospels of Jesus** in the plain language of the people in a series of BBC radio plays led thousands to embrace Jesus for the first time as alive, loving, and active in contrast to the romanticized stained glass of their English churches. (Those plays would have been smash hit podcasts today). Sayers’ broadcasts presented a Jesus whose **justice offered real change to inequity** in the world. For example, Sayers called out society’s attitude towards women. She agitated for equal dignity and opportunity in her time, on the basis of God’s character and purpose.

Those who think Sayers not orthodox or conservative enough need only look to the revered 18th Century evangelical, **Jonathon Edwards** – who asked, regarding doing justice, “Where have we any command in the Bible laid down in stronger terms, and in more peremptory urgent matter, than the command of giving to the poor?”

Conclusion

It should be no surprise that Jesus identified Himself with “doing justice” and sent his disciples out to demonstrate God’s love in action.” Psalm 146 describes God as the one who...

...executes justice for the oppressed
...gives food to the hungry
...sets the prisoners free
...opens the eyes of the blind
...lifts up those who are bowed down

...watches over the strangers, and
...upholds the orphan and the widow

Jesus ushered in the age of “doing justice” and is the prime example of actions for equity fuelled by love and mercy. He calls and empowers His Church to do the same that we might show God’s love on earth today.

This sermon series may seem as welcome as inviting an OT prophet round for dinner! But, today, as we set out to learn more about living justly, let’s allow our former perceptions of “doing justice” to be shaped by the bible. Let’s allow Jesus to make us those who “live more justly,” with God’s help.

[For God] has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God