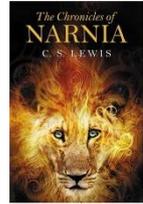


Sermon Series: The Gospel & Justice

#3 Jesus and Justice – Matthew 11:1-6 & Luke 14:12-14

The Chronicles of Narnia is a series of novels written by CS Lewis back in the 1950's. It's well-known, not just for the joy it brings to children and adults even today, but for its allusions to Jesus and to Christian beliefs.



For this topic, “Jesus and Justice” I’m reminded of Lewis’s **central character – Aslan**. In *The Lion, the witch, and the wardrobe*, when the children first enter Narnia, Mr Beaver tells them:

“Aslan is a lion - the Lion, the great Lion." "Ooh" said Susan. "I'd thought he was a man. Is he - quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion"..."Safe?" said Mr Beaver ..."Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good..."

Would you ever think to describe Jesus this way: “...**not safe, but good**”?¹

It’s clear in the New Testament that Jesus is no “**saccharine Saviour**” - no romanticized, white-faced, inert, arcane religious figure like those in **stained glass** and **statues**. Here follows two biblical reasons why we can speak of the Jesus of the Bible as “**not safe, but good.**”

1. Jesus is the fulfilment of the “Prophets”

Firstly, consider Jesus’ claim to be the **one who fulfils the “Prophets”**.

In the previous sermon of this series we studied Jesus’ claim to be the one who fulfils the Old Testament **Laws** of Moses.² In the same breath (in the same Bible verse) **Jesus claimed he came to fulfil “the Prophets”**. He is the hope of those strange and scary characters in the Old Testament writings who **called out injustice** and foretold God’s coming age of **justice and peace**.

In this regard we can truly say Jesus is “not safe, but good”.

¹ We must be careful with the word “safe” here. We are working hard to make our church a safe environment for children and vulnerable people, and so we must!

² Matt. 5:17

For example, in today's reading from *The Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 11*, followers of John the Baptist, who is in prison, come to Jesus with a question so they can report back what John cannot see with his own eyes. They ask Jesus, "Are you the one to come³, or should we search for another?" Jesus gives them this report to take back to John:

"...the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, those with skin diseases are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.'

As an important aside, we must be careful with these ancient idioms like "the blind" "the lame" "the poor". "Lepers", for example, referred to people suffering from a wide range of skin conditions for which they were called "unclean". Today such terms are rightly inappropriate and de-personalizing towards people with disabilities or struggles. The offence of these titles should not obscure the evidence in the Gospel that Jesus treated such people with value and dignity.

Jesus' own evidence for his messiahship has its roots in the Old Testament Prophets. God's promised new age of justice and peace, just as was predicted of old, prioritized the lowliest of people. Author Tim Keller says,

"While clearly Jesus was preaching the good news **to all**, he showed throughout his ministry the particular interest in the poor and the downtrodden **that God has always [shown]**. Jesus, in his incarnation⁴, **"moved in"** with the poor."⁵

Even a cursory scan of the Gospels shows **this emphasis of the Prophets** in the ministry of Jesus:

- Jesus lived with, ate with, associated "outcasts" (Matt. 9:13)
- Jesus raised the son of a poor widow (Lk. 7:11-16)
- Jesus showed respect to women who were socially shunned (Lk. 7:36; Jn. 4:27)
- Jesus made a hero of a racially vilified man (Lk 10:26)
- Jesus incited a riot including "foreign" widows in God's favour (Lk. 4:25-27)
- Jesus valued, came close to, and healed those called "unclean" (Mk. 1:41; Lk. 5:13)
- Jesus elevated the status of children when even his own followers did not (Lk. 18:15)
- Jesus praised poor people for their generosity (Mk 12:42-43)

³ Alluding to the "anointed" one or "Messiah" or "Christ" foretold by the prophets of old

⁴ Meaning: God becoming human or flesh

⁵ *Generosity and Justice*, p44

We should not be surprised, since Jesus' own mother prophesied that her miraculous child would **"fill the poor with good things"** but would **"turn the rich empty away"** (Lk. 1:53).

In this regard, the Jesus of the Bible is truly **"not safe"** for those who **hoard wealth** for themselves or **abuse power** over others for personal gain. This makes sense of Jesus' sign off in Luke 14:14: "Blessed are they who take no offence at me." Jesus often warned how much harder it is for "the rich" to enter the kingdom of God.⁶

REFLECT: Is it possible that we sometimes **short-sell people** today **when we share the Gospel message** without any reference to Jesus' bias for those who are the "underdogs" of society?

No doubt Jesus came to offer God's forgiveness of sins, and to grant assurance of eternal life to anyone who has faith. But if we omit the news that Jesus ushered in the age of God's justice that leads to **peace**; that His heart was **fuelled** with mercy and **aflame** with the desire for true **equity** for the poor, we may mislead people about what faith might look like in real living.

Darrell Guder, in his book *Missional Church*, says:

God's "...peace comes hand in hand with justice. Without justice, there can be no real peace, and without peace, no real justice..."

As the one who fulfils the "Prophets", then, we can say surely that Jesus is **"not safe, but good."**

2. Jesus calls his followers to a new humanity

The second biblical reason we could call Jesus "not safe, but good" is found in Jesus' call to us to take part in a **"new humanity"**.⁷ He calls us to a **life marked by generosity and justice** for the poor, the vulnerable, and the marginalized. For example, in Luke 14:1-14 we read of Jesus as a guest at a banquet being held by a wealthy Jewish man (see verses 1-7). Jesus watched as influential

⁶ Matthew 19:23. We should also note that many in those days were hoping for a Messiah that would elevate religious Israelites to power over the Romans. In this regard too, Jesus statement in Luke 14:14 makes sense too as he was a great disappointment to such ambitions for power over others.

⁷ Paul coins this phrase as the result of the cross of Christ in Ephesians chapter 2 (see vs. 15)

guests vied for the head positions at the table. Then turned to the host and told him this parable⁸:

'When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbours, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. ¹³ But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. ¹⁴ And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.'

The 18th Century slave trader **John Newton**, whose conversion is enshrined in the famous hymn *Amazing Grace*, asked in relation to this passage above, "has any part of Jesus' teaching been more neglected by His own people?"

Jesus wasn't saying you can no longer invite your friends and family 'round for dinner! Jesus often used **hyperbole** to shock **his audience**. It's as if Jesus says to the host "ruin your chances for wealth and status and you'll know what true rewards are." Jesus' prophetic ministry makes people consider what God's grace really looks like – what **God's new humanity** looks like.⁹

In this passage of Scripture above Jesus was challenging the common ancient practice of "**patronage**." In those days people established and extended their business success and societal status by **currying favour** with the wealthy and influential by **holding dinner parties** in their homes. His parable sought to **expose a system** that was **neither compassionate nor just**; a society divided by class and race – the very **opposite** of what Jesus presented as God desire for humanity.

Canadian author, Sarah Bessey says,

"God hungers for justice. And as God's people, **we hunger for justice**. It is precisely because of our great love for God that we pursue justice, make peace, love our enemies, seek to reconcile souls to their Saviour, care for widows and orphans, build schools for kids halfway around the world – while we also make dinner for our loved ones and check our children's homework every night."

⁸ Is it a parable, or was Jesus addressing the host, who he had presumably come to know, personally? The hyperbole suggests it is a parable, but quite confronting in the context.

⁹ Elsewhere Jesus affirms friendship and care for family. Another example of Jesus' use of hyperbole is in Matt. 19:16-26 where he tells a rich young ruler "...go and sell all your possessions..." ie discard your unjust system.

Bessey's statement reminds me of those "righteous" ones in Jesus' parable about sheep and goats in *Matthew, Chapter 25*. The ones commended in that parable were **oblivious to Christ's presence** in the needy ones they served – they lived mercifully and justly as a matter of second nature! Such is the vision of Jesus for **God's new humanity**.

In this regard too, then – Jesus **call for us to participate in God's new humanity** – we can say that Jesus is "**not safe, but good.**"

How can we respond to this call? We could open our parties to people of the streets and lanes (several nearby churches to this weekly!). Perhaps, if this is not possible for each of us, we wrestle with Jesus' call to **opt out of participating in unjust systems** in today's society. Then, it follows that we can be involved in **exposing systems** in society that oppress and divide.

For example, as the authors of the book *Half the Sky* point out, the oppression of women worldwide is "**the paramount moral challenge**" of the present era, much as the fight against slavery was in the past. Even a brief statistical report in *Half the Sky* hammers home the point:

- 22,000 children die each day due to poverty (mostly in unseen, unscrutinized, situations)
- 1.1 billion people in developing countries have inadequate access to water, and 2.6 billion lack basic sanitation.
- Women aged 15-45 are more likely to be maimed or die from male violence than from cancer, malaria, traffic accidents, and war combined.
- 1/3 of women face abuse at home.
- Another major study found that 50% of women had experienced physical or sexual violence by a male partner or a boyfriend, and 70% of female murder victims are killed by their male partners.

One way we respond to Jesus' prophetic call in our time, then, is by partnering with agencies like the Barbara May Foundation, the ASRC, Common Grace, and programs preventing domestic violence. Many individuals in our congregation serve on committees, shape public policies, and some even serve people in the streets and lanes of our city with this emphasis of God's new humanity as their motivation. Even our team leading the low-cost weekly playgroup understand they are often serving local women who suffer from unjust structures in society – even in our affluent part of the world.

Jesus' call to a participate in the making of a new humanity that God will one day bring to completion. David Bosch says, in the meantime, we, the people of God, must work to "erect, in the here and now and in the teeth of [unjust] structures, signs of God's new world."

In this regard, we can say that Jesus is **"not safe, but good."** He shakes our **status quo**.

Conclusion

So then, Jesus is the **one who fulfils the Prophets**, and Jesus calls his followers to be part of a **new humanity** that demonstrates God's **mercy and justice that leads to peace**. He roars at injustice, and in this regard is not safe, yet to the humble and contrite of heart Jesus is an approachable, grace-giving, life-changing Saviour.

I'm reminded of another saying from Lewis's Narnia books. Mr Beaver says to the children, **"Aslan is on the move"**. We should be a people who look to where Jesus is "moving" in our time and place. The great 18th century preacher Jonathan Edwards said, "The task of every generation is to discover in which direction the Sovereign Redeemer is moving, then move in that direction."

I want to urge us to be **on the move** with the **not-safe-but-good** Jesus.