

Sermon Series: The Gospel & Justice

#6 How should we do Justice? – Matthew 25:34-40

Today we come to the end of our sermon series: The Gospel and Justice.

Last week's sermon put the reason **why** we should do justice well, saying ...

“...concern for the poor and generous sharing of wealth are signs of someone who has truly understood the Gospel of grace¹, ...the inevitable sign of a real, true, justifying Gospel faith.” (Dianne Shay)

What remains is to ask **how** we should go about doing justice:

- Should we, for instance, abandon our worship centres and convert them into shelters and soup kitchens?
- Or, should the church focus on strengthening disciples, and encourage individuals to be generous wherever injustice is present?
- Or, should local churches facilitate generosity and action through other agencies and institutions that serve poor and needy people?

The answer is validly **“yes” to any of these** models and more

- I've been to a church in **Islamabad** that converted its hall for primary health care training to serve the people of the slums.
- I've been to a church in **Amsterdam** that provides childcare for sex workers while campaigning against exploitation of women.
- I've been to another in **Lisbon** where the members of the church go out to the streets at 5am (the coldest point of the night) with blankets and warm soup.

Each church works **out the “how”** of doing justice in its own context.

Tim Keller comments argues... “if it is true that justice and mercy to the poor are the inevitable signs of justifying faith, it is hard to believe that the church would not reflect a heart for justice corporately in many ways.”

Yet, before we launch into soup kitchen mode, the Bible has a more fundamental step we should all take when responding to the “how” of doing

¹ Grace here means unearned, undeserved favour and love, e.g. Ephesians 2:8-9

justice. Let's look to *The Gospel According to Matthew*, chapter 25. In the last block of teaching from Jesus to his disciples recorded by Matthew, Jesus **likens himself** to an ancient merciful **king** and likens the final judgment of the nations to an **ancient shepherd** sorting sheep and goats (vv32-33). In the story he tells his followers lies the foundation for living more justly. He says to his disciples...

³⁴ Then the king will say to those at his right hand², "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵ for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me. ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸ And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹ And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" ⁴⁰ And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me."

Some scholars call this a **parable**. Sure, it has elements of storytelling, but Jesus usually told parables for the crowds to ponder. Here, as Matthew 24:1 makes clear, Jesus withdrew from the crowds to teach his disciples how to live in the light of His Gospel and in the knowledge of the coming Day of Judgement.³ This is **practical instruction** for disciples, not parable.

Some preachers avoid this passage for fear that it promotes the idea that **good works** can **earn God's favour** and salvation. But we know that Jesus was speaking only to those whom **he had already welcomed into God's Kingdom by grace** – irrespective of what they had done good or bad in their lives before. There is no sense here of a "gospel of works". Instead, as Leon Morris put it,

² In the ancient world, the right-hand side was symbolic of favour or authority

³ Matthew records this as the last block of teaching of Jesus to his disciples before his trial and death in chs. 24-25. Chapter 24 begins with Jesus withdrawing from the crowds and then instructing his disciples.

“Jesus is citing evidence that shows these ones do in fact belong to Jesus’ kingdom. Their lives are evidence that God has been at work in them.”

With this in mind, let's imagine what those first disciples were thinking as Jesus first spoke those words in Matthew 25:34-40.⁴

Firstly, they would have thought...

i. This sounds important (Matt. 25:31-46)

Jesus gave a list of actions: feeding the hungry, satisfying the thirsty, clothing the naked, giving shelter to the homeless, and visiting the imprisoned. He repeated this list four times in this chapter. They would have thought, “Jesus wants these merciful actions to be remembered, to be a priority, and to be put into practice.”

Secondly, they should have thought...

ii. This sounds “biblical” (Isaiah 58:6-7)

Jesus’ list of actions in verses 35-36 aligns almost word for word with what was called for in the lives of the Old Testament people of God. In Isaiah 58:6-7, for example, God said: “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice...to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them...” They would have thought, “Jesus expects similar acts of mercy to flow from our lives – the same actions God has always desired in the lives of those God calls.”

Thirdly, they would have been thinking...

iii. This sounds familiar (see Matthew chapter 10)

Jesus had previously taught his disciples that they too might experience similar hardships of hunger, thirst, homelessness, and worse because of their association with Him. Matthew recorded such conversation back in

⁴ It's clear from verses 41-46 that this teaching was part of the major theme of chapters 24-25, warning about the Judgment to come and how to live accordingly, but within that teaching we discover other gems of truth.

chapter 10 of this Gospel. Those disciples listening to Jesus would have thought, “Not only might we face hardship and need kindness, we know that Jesus himself has been poor, hungry, thirsty, homeless, and imprisoned.⁵ Surely if anyone should have empathy for people facing hardship it is those who follow Jesus.” Perhaps they also remembered that Jesus had said, “Those who welcome you [as needy travellers] welcome me, and welcome God” an interesting mirror image of what the king says to the responders in Matt. 25:40.⁶

Fourthly, they might have thought...

iv. **Any follower of Jesus can do this** (Matt. 10:40-42; 25:40)

Notice that the king in Jesus’ story commended the giving of a cup of cold water to the thirsty. In the ancient middle east, giving water to a visitor was expected; taken for granted without reward. The disciples must have thought, “Jesus seems to be elevating this basic action to something he commends as a godly act of kindness! That means anybody could receive such commendation for even the smallest gesture of grace if a well or spring is nearby.” Such is God’s grace, even the poor themselves can be included among those commended in the story as much as those who do great works of overturning justice. Anyone who is thankful for God’s mercy at work in them, can “do justice” in God’s eyes.

Getting into the heads of those first disciples helps us see that Jesus was **interested primarily** in condition of **hearts**, not what **hands** and **feet** could do for God. Did you notice that the ones commended by the king **had no clue** that their actions been so significant (vs. 37) – their acts of kindness to those in hardship seemed to be **second nature** to them, so attuned were their hearts to that of their merciful king.⁷

This is why Matthew describes them as “the righteous”, or “the just” or the “justified ones” (vs.37). For, God wants our primary response to the question

⁵ The Apostle Paul, testified to such hardships in his life in 1 Corinthians 11:23-27.

⁶ Matt. 10:40

⁷ Incidentally, it’s interesting to see how the “unrighteous” of verse 44 were also ignorant of Jesus’ presence in the lives of the needy. In this case it pointed to a lack of God’s regenerative work in their hearts.

“How should we do justice?” to be connected to the justification we receive by faith in the one whose mercy was so freely offered to us.⁸ That’s why this series is called: **The Gospel AND Justice**. It's how we regard Christ and His death for sins **that matters first**. God offers any penitent person the gift of Christ’s perfect righteousness. We receive it by faith, not by any merit of our own. And as we welcome the Holy Spirit in God works to transform our hearts and minds. It’s from this condition of the heart that Jesus expects love of mercy and acting justly to increase in us.

Therefore, we should keep the Gospel and “doing justice” in view when we pray, when we read the Scriptures, when we gather with Christians for worship or ministry, and as we go about our daily lives.

As the prophet Micah put it long ago...

[God] has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)

Let’s continue to be a church in which sharing the Good News and doing justice go hand in hand.

⁸ Romans 5:1-2 – “justified” means “declared in the right” with God, something we can’t experience without God’s mercy because of sin