

An Understanding of Justice

Good to see you guys today. If you have a bible, turn with me to Micah 6. My name is Jeff, and I'm one of the pastors at City Church. I don't get to be up here much because my job tends to be a little more behind-the-scenes, but I'm particularly excited about getting to be a part of this series, for a few reasons. It is obviously a topic near and dear to me personally as a Chinese American. I was born where a lot of Asians are born... Los Angeles. Earlier last year, my neighbor at my old house came up to me during the Safer at Home lockdown and asked me "why did your people brought over the coronavirus?" A slightly offensive question right? And the whole time I was thinking... the good people of LA didn't bring this over... we gave the world a lot of weird things like avocado toasts yes, but not COVID.

But all that said, I'm glad to be here for week three of our series, *Precious in His Sight*. If you've missed either of the first two weeks, let me just briefly catch you up on where we've been so far. In week 1, Kent took us on a bit of a tour through the Scriptures to show us how central and constant the theme of "the nations" is in the storyline of the bible. And we talked about how, when the bible says God desires his family to be made up of "the nations," it's not just talking about plots of land on a map, but rather *ethnicities*: people and people groups of different colors across the globe. God has always been about forming a family out of all *ethnicities* and all of them made in His image.

Then, last week, Marcus helped us wrap our minds around the concept of *oppression* in the bible, and used history to show us how so much of the experience of black Americans very much fits in that category, from our nation's inception to present day. Now they're not the *only* people group in America that has been oppressed, but it is pretty undeniable that the black people in America *have been subjected* to anything from moderate to severe oppression. And as one family of God, we are called to mourn alongside our black brothers and sisters of the history to which we all come from.

So today, I want to pick up where Marcus left off. He mentioned that because of who God is and because of God being a "defender for the oppressed," that means we as God's people should be defenders of the oppressed too. But maybe you hear that and think to yourself "okay, I hate that all of that has happened to black Americans—I really do. But why is it *my* responsibility to do something about that? After all, *I didn't personally own slaves*. I didn't *personally* vote for racially biased policies—so why is it up to me to rectify a problem that I didn't (at least directly) cause?

Today, I want to try and speak to that a little from the Scriptures. And a lot of the answer has to do with the idea of "justice" in the bible. Now *justice*, unfortunately, is another one

of those words that has been colored and co-opted by the political back-and-forth of our day. The Left sometimes uses “justice” as a catch-all word to talk about anything that they think should or shouldn’t be done, and the Right will use terms like “social justice warriors” to insult and write off anything that they think is too woke or “politically correct.” But before justice was ever a talking point on the Left or the Right, it was a deeply biblical idea.

One time I was grabbing lunch with a new person that was interested in getting to know more about our church family. At one point of the conversation, the word “justice” came up and the new person got incredibly uncomfortable. He was visibly distressed. So as a good little enneagram 8, I just outright asked him, what was it about the word justice that made him uncomfortable? He proceeded to tell me that it is concerning that we as a church care about justice issues because that comes across to him we have fallen more in line with the political left.

As followers of God, we need a better way forward in thinking and talking about justice issues because justice is first and foremost belongs to God and not a political party. We need a foundation on why we need to care about justice issues other than political rhetoric or “it’s the right thing to do”, we need to see justice through the lens of our Heavenly Father, who created everything. We need to understand that God as the creator is angry and heartbroken over the things that are wrecking chaos and pain in His creation. So I want us to dive into some of that today. I want to see if we can re-situate the idea of justice into its biblical framework. Because the word and idea itself is deeply, profoundly biblical—and understanding that is absolutely essential to our pursuit of racial justice or any justice issue.

To do that, I want us to start off by looking at just one verse of Micah, chapter 6. Here’s what it says in v. 8:

He has told you, O man, 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?

Countless scholars have pointed out that this verse is a great summary of how God wants his people to live in the world. I know we have a lot of people at City Church that are considering following Jesus or have recently begun following Jesus. If that’s you, and you’re looking for a summary of where to start in regards to the Christian life, this is a pretty good passage to reference.

It says that *as God’s people*, we are to “do justice, love kindness (another word for that would be mercy), and walk humbly with God. Now it’s probably helpful to think of those

less as a list of three *separate* things, and more as three ways to say the *same thing*. In other words, knowing the God of the bible means “walking humbly with him,” which itself encompasses loving kindness, and doing justice. That’s what it means to have a relationship with God—it looks like your life reflecting all of that.

Now that word “justice” in the passage, in the original language is the word *mishpat*. Can you say that? *Mishpat*. The most basic meaning of the word is to *treat people equitably*. And this idea centers on what Kent talked about on week 1 of our series: that each of us are made in the image of God or the *imago Dei* if you prefer latin, and because of that we are given inherent worth and value. So *mishpat* is treating people rightly in light of the *imago Dei*.

Mishpat also refers to *justice* much like we think about it *today*: seeing to it that people are punished for committing a crime. Seeing to it that those who do wrong don’t just get away with it. But it also means “giving people their rights.” In summary, it’s giving people *what they are due*, whether that is appropriate punishment, or appropriate protection and care and provision. That’s what *mishpat* or *justice* means in the bible: giving people what they are due.

And can I make an observation? (Asks the guy with the microphone) Generally speaking, the political Right really gets and insists on giving people the punishment they are due, and the Left really gets and insists on giving people the protection or care they are due. But each of them struggle mightily with doing both and the bible says we are called to do both.

And this word *mishpat*, in its various forms, is used over 200 times in the Old Testament. It is quite a *theme*. And notice that “doing justice” is not optional in Micah 6. It doesn’t say that knowing God is what’s important, and then if you have extra time or money or energy, you might consider doing some justice. It doesn’t say that a relationship with God is what’s important, but that if you’re a little more Left-leaning you should also do justice because that’s your thing. It says that “walking humbly with God” *necessarily includes* loving kindness, and doing *justice*.

And if you trace the idea of *mishpat*, or justice, through the bible, you’ll find that it gets brought up most often in the context of four groups of people: the *widow*, the *orphan*, the *poor*, and the *foreigner*. Consistently and constantly in the bible, God’s people are called to ensure that those four groups of people are cared for, provided for, defended, and stood up for. Now why might *those* groups of people be highlighted?

Well simply put, it's because those people were most *vulnerable to oppression* in the ancient world. Because of their status, they were the groups most often taken advantage of, looked over, and mistreated—because quite frankly, other people could often *get away* with treating them that way. And as Marcus mentioned some last week, it's still quite similar today. Often, the oppression and mistreatment of certain groups of people continues because there are very few consequences enforced for people doing that. And remember from a second ago, justice is both appropriate punishment *and* appropriate protection. So it shouldn't be a surprise to us that when there is not appropriate *punishment* for the guilty, there is a lack of protection and care for the oppressed. They're often two sides of the coin.

And all of this is why the God of the bible calls his people to *do justice* in regards to those groups of people. And what's interesting is that when God's people neglect to care for those vulnerable groups of people, it's not called a lack of *compassion* or *neglect*—it's called *injustice*. Look with me at what New York pastor and author Tim Keller says about this:

The mishpat, or justness, of a society, according to the Bible, is evaluated by how it treats these groups (those four groups we mentioned earlier—the widow, the poor, the orphan, and the foreigner). Any neglect shown to the needs of the members of this quartet is not called merely a lack of mercy or charity, but a violation of justice, of mishpat. God loves and defends those with the least economic and social power, and so should we. That is what it means to “do justice.”

In my experience, a lot of proclaimed followers of Jesus have not been exposed to the theme of justice and doing justice in the bible. Generally as soon as someone starts putting forward these ideas, Christians will reject what they're saying with cries of Marxism or socialism, because they simply aren't familiar with the teachings on justice that we find in the bible.

The theme of justice continues from the Old Testament into the New Testament. If you follow Jesus' ministry in the gospels, you'll find that he has a natural inclination towards the poor, the outcast, and the excluded. He holds them up as examples of faith. He gravitates towards them in large crowds and shows an extra measure of care and attention towards them. He rails against those who mistreat, overlook, and oppress them.

In the gospel of Luke specifically, the first public words out of Jesus' mouth, when he is announcing the start of his earthly ministry, go like this:

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, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

So the theme mishpat or justice is throughout scriptures and is something God cares deeply about. Today, we are going to look at a passage that a lot of us are familiar with. Turn with me to **Luke 10**. In this passage, Jesus does not explicitly use the word *justice*, but the theme of justice is all over it. So I want us to consider this story and see what we can glean from it in terms of how we approach justice as followers of Jesus.

Now, for context, in this passage, Jesus is telling a story in response to a question that someone asks him. A teacher of the Old Testament Law approaches Jesus and says “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” That’s teacher-of-the-law for “what does it look like to have a relationship with God?” Jesus responds to that question with his own question, which is “what is written in the Law?” In other words, “you’re the expert there guy—what do you think it looks like?” The teacher of the Law says that it means “loving God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and loving your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus says “nailed it (that’s a paraphrase). You’re absolutely right—go do that.”

But then he asks Jesus a follow-up question: “who is my neighbor?” This guy is very shrewd. He understands that there’s no way around the whole “love God, love your neighbor thing.” So the question he asks is “okay—then *who is* my neighbor, exactly?” In other words, “who do I have to love, and who *don’t* I have to love?” He wants Jesus to give him a pass on loving some people. Instead Jesus tells him a story, and this story is a way of explaining what “loving your neighbor” truly looks like. The story that many of us know as the story of the “Good Samaritan.”

Let’s walk through it together, and we’ll point out some things as we go along. Starting in v. 30:

[30] Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead.

Now, at just one verse into the story, Jesus’ audience would’ve already had a very concrete picture in their head of the situation Jesus describes. A man traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho would’ve assumed that this was a Jewish man, and this particular route was known for being especially dangerous and treacherous. There were so-called

“highwaymen” all along the route, notorious for doing exactly what Jesus says they do: robbing people, stealing everything they had including their clothes, and beating them senseless. So this was a very *realistic* hypothetical scenario for the people listening. If they were Jewish and if they traveled that road, there was a very good chance something like this would happen to them.

With that established, Jesus continues:

[31] Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. [32] So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

A priest and a Levite would both be expected to stop and help the injured man, because they would have both seen him as a brother in the faith. But they don't. They pass by on the other side, leaving him there in pain. Then this happens, v. 33:

[33] But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion.

So to understand the provocative nature of what Jesus is saying, you need to understand the relationship between Jewish people and Samaritan people at the time. It would have been hard to describe a relationship filled with more animosity and bad blood than the one between Jews and Samaritans. Much of it was racial in nature, some of it was historical in nature—but these two groups of people did not get along *at all*.

Maybe it helps to put it in a modern context. Imagine if today, Jesus was telling this story to a well-known, hyper-Conservative politician who thinks that “woke Leftists” are trying to ruin our country. The story might go that *he* (the politician) was on a trip to see his supporters, and was robbed and beaten and left for dead. And while he was lying there, a well-known conservative traveling evangelist came by, and passed by on the other side of the road. Then, a MAGA-hat wearing Trump supporter came by, and also passed by on the other side. But *then*, a BLM protester on his way home from the latest rally, with a protest sign still in hand, sees the man on the side of the road, and has compassion on him, and comes to help.

Or substitute in whatever two people you want to. Let's say it's a BLM protester by the side of the road, and the only person who stops to help them is a MAGA hat-wearing, Trump flag waving conservative. Or it is neo-nazi covered in swastika tatoos lying by the side of the road and the only person who stops to help is an Israeli soldier.

Are you feeling uncomfortable yet? Because that is closer to what the original audience was feeling as Jesus tells this story. Sub in whatever two groups of people you want to, but you've gotta feel how uncomfortable this story would've been to Jesus' audience as he told it. Their blood pressure would have been rising as he talked about it.

Now, just for clarity, I'm not saying that's the same *thing* as what Jesus is saying—there are differences. But I am saying that that story would have a very similar *effect* to what Jesus' story in Luke 10 has. It would've created the same polarizing response in his audience as that one would today. Because it unapologetically bursts open some preconceived categories in people's minds. This is why Jesus was such a brilliant teacher and storyteller. This man who culturally speaking would have been the least likely to help the man in need of help, *is* the one who has compassion on him.

Let's keep reading about the *lengths* the Samaritan goes to to help, v. 34:

[34] He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. [35] And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.'

So he stops, has compassion on the man lying by the side of the road, he provided emergency care to the man's injuries, and then takes him to an inn (sort of like a hospital today) and pays for the man to stay there until he has fully recovered. And then offers to foot any additional expenses incurred. This would have been a *substantial* expense back then.

This man, the Samaritan, who was most likely consistently and vocally hated and opposed by the Jewish man by the side of the road, goes out of his way to care for the man. And keep in mind: the Samaritan had *nothing to do* with the man's injuries. He did not cause the problem in the least—and yet he sees to it that those wrongs are righted, at his own expense.

Then Jesus draws the story to a close and asks the man he told the story to this question, v. 36:

*[36] Which of these three, do **you** think, proved to be a **neighbor** to the man who fell among the robbers?"*

“Which of these three men: the priest, the Levite, or the Samaritan, do *you think* proved to be a *neighbor* to the man by the side of the road? Who do *you think* really embodies obedience to the Law? Who do *you think* really embodies the type of life God wants from his people?” Verse 37:

[37] He said, “*The one who showed him mercy.*” He can’t even bring himself to say the words “the Samaritan.” *And Jesus said to him, “You go, and do likewise.”*

Jesus tells the Jewish man, who is an expert in the Law of the Old Testament, to go and be like the Samaritan. Like the person he hated, despised. The person he thought embodied everything about how *not* to live a life that glorified God. He now is forced, in the context of the story, to go and imitate that man.

Now, with all of that unpacked, there’s a lot we could talk about. We could dig even further into the racial implications of all of this—how Jesus intentionally forced his audience to reckon with their racial biases and ethnic superiority. How he was forcing them to see the imago dei in someone that they were inclined to not see it in. That would all be worth discussing.

But here’s the one thing I want us to home in on for today. I want us to notice what Jesus says that *love is*. To Jesus, love is not, as some people think today, just being *pleasant* to people. If you stop the average person at a coffee shop here in town and ask them what they think is wrong with the world, there’s at least a 75% chance they’re gonna say “we just need to love each other more, man. Just need more *love*.” And while I don’t disagree with their statement, I don’t know that I agree with their *definition* of love. Because generally what they mean by that is that we should all just be *pleasant* towards one another. We should be *nice*. Just try not to hate people, and smile at them when you see them. That’s it.

But notice that’s not how Jesus defines love here. He defines love as going out of your way to right a wrong that someone else occurred, at great cost to yourself. Can we agree that’s on a different level than “be pleasant to people”? **The man in the story who embodies love is the man who encounters a wrong *he did not cause*, and chooses to make it his responsibility anyway. To take something that was not his fault, and make it his responsibility.**

Now, here’s where this connects to everything we’ve been talking about so far this morning. Because this all means that apparently to Jesus, being a person who “loves the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength; and loves your neighbor as yourself,” means being a person who does *justice*. Because do you remember from

earlier? Doing justice means you take responsibility for righting wrongs, *even when you did not cause the wrong*. It means seeing to it that people are treated equitably, *whether or not the inequity was your fault*. And here, Jesus reaffirms that, and provides us with a vivid example of it. The man who loved his neighbor was the Samaritan, who righted a wrong he did not cause. That is what it means to do justice, and what it means to love your neighbor as God has commanded us.

And here's the craziest thing about all of this to me: we don't even necessarily need the story of the good Samaritan, or an Old Testament understanding of justice to be motivated to live like this. The most obvious reason that followers of Jesus should be inspired to right wrongs they did not cause is *because that is precisely what Jesus did for us*. That's the message of the gospel! That Jesus righted wrongs he did not cause. The sin in our hearts was not Jesus' fault. The sin in our world was not Jesus' fault. And yet he saw it as *his responsibility* to do something about remedying it. This is the basic foundation of our faith: Jesus, who knew no sin, became sin for us, so we might become the righteousness of God. He took personal responsibility for what wasn't his fault. And when we begin to see the world as Jesus was **our** Good Samaritan. He sought our good at his expense, in fact it cost him everything. This truth gives us the motivation to do the same.

For some of us this series has been difficult for you so far and you do not understand why we are spending this much time on this topic. For some of us we already care about racial injustice but you do not know why you should care about it other than it feels like the right thing to do. For all of us I think we need to hear and be reminded of this reality today. The reason you are a beloved son or daughter of God is because God Himself took it upon his shoulders to make a way for you. He saw your brokenness and shame and he came for you. Because he absolutely loves you. So the mentality of "not my fault or not my responsibility" starts to fly against the very best news of your life: That God loves you so much that he saw it as his responsibility to make things right between you and Him. That is the best news any of us can hope for. And that's our motivation for doing justice. I realize we have at times been politically disciplined out of thinking about it in those terms, but *that's* what we're talking about.

And that God is calling all of us to embody that good news to the world around us. *That* is why we should be motivated to do something about oppression and its effects in our world. It honestly does not matter, in terms of our response, whether or not the oppression and injustice was *your* fault. Because whether it was or wasn't, it is still your responsibility to do something about it. That was Jesus' posture towards us, and that is to be our posture towards others.

Let me put it this way. Can I tell you something I've noticed as an observer of racial tensions in our country? Here's what I've noticed. In general, among white people, there tends to be a lack of awareness of racial injustice, and sometimes a lack of desire to do anything about it. And in response, often there is a pushback from black people where they have said "well, white people, it's *your fault* that the racism is there, and therefore you need to do something about it." And on some level, I get where that is coming from. Some white people *are* personally guilty of injustice. And, it's easy to feel like if we don't make white people feel guilty and responsible, they won't be *motivated* to do anything about the injustice. So we feel like we need to heap that shame on them in order to motivate them into action. And that's understandable. And I get it, shame and guilt is a powerful motivator.

But can I just suggest something? As with any aspect of life, shame can only motivate people for so long. Guilt can only motivate people so much. At some point you will just be over it, give up or become bitter because you realize no matter how much you do, it will never be enough. **In order to motivate lasting, sustained change and effort, you need something much more powerful and lasting than guilt and shame. You need the good news of Jesus.** You need the message of the Scriptures. And those Scriptures teach this: that *whether or not the injustice was your fault, if you are a follower of Jesus, it's your responsibility. Because that is precisely how Jesus approached us and that is why we are called to approach justice in the same way.* The goal is not for white folks in our church to feel guilty or ashamed, the goal is to see the brokenness of our country through the lens of the bible.

So let me leave you with something that is sort of an application for today, and something of an application for the past three weeks. When we talk about doing justice, specifically in regards to racial issues in our country, I think we're talking about three categories: **learning, lamenting,** and **living.** A few words on each:

Learning

First, we need to be educating ourselves in regards to racial injustice. So much of the time, the reason people end up being unhelpful in their pursuit of justice is because they act without first understanding. We need to first *learn*.

I think this actually has two elements to it. One is simply educating ourselves as to the *experiences* of people of color in our country. If you have black friends—and by that, I mean *actual* friends, not just people that you call your "black friends" because you had a conversation one time—but if you have black friends, listening well for them to share their experience.

If you *don't* have black friends, here's what I'll tell you: you live in an unbelievable time in human history. Because right now, just by Googling the words "the experience of black people in America," you will find likely thousands upon thousands of blogposts and papers and articles that talk about just that. You can buy books at the click of a button. I don't know that you guys are aware of this, but there is a website called www.Amazon.com, where if you buy a book, they will bring it to your house within two days. It's basically real magic. But there are countless books available to you that help you understand and familiarize yourself with the experience of people of color in our country. There are podcasts. There are Netflix shows. Literally so many options—you can learn about the experience of people of color.

And then the second element to this is educating ourselves on how the bible speaks to those experiences. That's much of what we've been doing in this series: taking situations and experiences in our world, and helping us have biblical language and categories for them. *Imago dei*. *The nations*. *Oppression*. *Justice*. All of these are biblical categories to help us know how to think about and how to approach current situations and experiences in our world. So in a couple different ways, *learn* about justice. Second...

Lament

We mentioned this last Sunday, but once we start to understand the experience of people of color, both now and throughout history, we as followers of Jesus should *lament* those realities. Spend time grieving the effects of sin on our world—*all* sin, but specifically for our purposes, sin in the form of racism and racial injustice. We lament because there are brothers and sisters in the family of God who are mourning and hurting. We lament because we are all in one God's family.

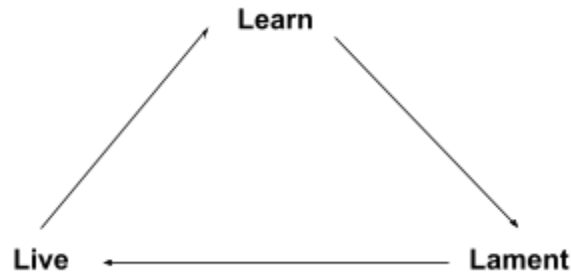
When another shooting of an unarmed black man happens, if you're close with people of color in your life, reach out and just let them know you're thinking about them and that you hate it too. Don't require them to respond, don't expect them to respond. Just lament with them as you lament with God.

Spend time actually processing the injustices you see. Try doing that before you get angry, before you take action. Grieve and ask God what he would have you do. And then...

Live

This is where the rubber hits the road. Take practical steps to push back against and undue the chains of injustice. Speak up. Advocate. Vote. Care. Be helpful. I'm going to leave it there because next week we're going to get a lot more practical, but let your emotions and desires push you into action.

Seen together, this process looks a lot like this:



The goal is that this would be a perpetual process of learning, lamenting, and living out a pursuit of justice that would endure over the long haul. It's not a step by step process, it's not a do these three things once and I'm done—it's a continual process of all three as we strive towards God's vision for our world together.

Next week my good friend Ant will spend more time talking about what it looks like to live this out. But this week, I don't want us to miss out on why we should care about justice: This is all motivated by learning what Jesus first did for us, and calls us to do for others.

Let's pray.