

# Justice

Good morning everyone, it's great to see all of you here today. We're going to be jumping around to a few passages today, but we're going to start off in 2 Peter 3 if you want to turn there in your bible. My name is Eric and I am a pastor in training here. If I haven't had the chance to meet you yet, I would definitely love to be able to do that. If you're just now joining us, you are jumping in on the last week of our series we've been going through called "In Knoxville as it is in Heaven." We've spent the last 6 weeks looking at different characteristics of the new heavens and the new earth. And we've been talking about the different ways that we as followers of Jesus live in light of those realities at a hands-on level in our day to day lives. Today, we're going to cover one last, very important aspect of how we bring heaven to earth. But before we get into the specifics of what it is, I'd love to pray for us.

Like I said, the first place we're going to look today is in 2 Peter. Look with me at chapter 3 verse 13, it will be on the screen:

*But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells.*

That last part is what we want to pay closest attention to. What does he say dwells in the new heaven and new earth? *Righteousness*. The word used for *righteousness* there means "what is deemed right by the Lord," or, "righteousness of which God is the author." So the author is saying here that we are "looking forward" to a time and place where "righteousness dwells." The new heavens and the new earth is a place that is as God intended, where everything is *right*, where everything is made to be as it should be. We can look all the way back at the beginning of the Bible at the creation narrative and we can see how God originally designed everything. He designed each and every thing so that all things and all people would be taken care of and provided for and would have everything they need. That was his intention. But you and I also experience on a daily, and probably hourly, basis how that design has been broken by sin. We all know people who have tragically lost their lives too soon. We've seen friends and family get sick. We've experienced relational hurt and brokenness between friends and family. We've seen the horrible effects of generational oppression. But what we see here is that we have a promise. See, all of those things describe life as it *shouldn't be*. But here in 2 Peter, we get a promise that God will one day bring us back to how everything was *intended* to be. To use another word from the bible, God will restore justice. Those words—righteousness and justice—are often found side by side in the bible (we'll look at

one example of that here in a second). In fact, one translation even translates that verse in 2 Peter 3, "where justice rules." And looking even broader at scripture, they are used together as what's called "fixed companion words," or words that help explain each other, over 50 times in the Old Testament.

Now, no matter where you fall politically, or socially, or economically, I think in general most people can agree the world is not perfect. Everything is pretty obviously not exactly as it should be. But at the same time, I think when I bring up the word "justice," especially since it seems like such a big buzzword in our society today, I'd be willing to bet it conjures up all kinds of different feelings in people across the spectrum. For some, you may hear the word *justice* and think "absolutely I'm on board with that! Bring on the change, tear down corrupt systems!" You're all in on that idea. Others of you may hear the word justice be thinking, "here we go again: people just finding things to critique and tear down for no reason." But regardless of what your initial response may be, we have to acknowledge that "justice" is a biblical concept at its core. It is definitely important that we as followers of Jesus *define* that word like the bible defines it (and that's what we're going to spend some time doing this morning), but it's also important that we don't write the idea off entirely because of its political connotations as of late. As we said earlier, in the Old Testament specifically, the ideas of justice and righteousness are tied together in really interesting ways. Look with me at Proverbs 8:20:

*I walk in the way of righteousness, along the paths of justice...*

If you aren't familiar with the book of Proverbs, in general, it's written in couplets. The second half of the verse usually describes in detail what the first half says. In this passage, the author says, "I will walk in the way of righteousness." Sounds like a great idea! How is he going to make sure he's walking in the way of righteousness? He follows it up with a clarifying statement by saying, "I'm going to do that by following 'along the paths of justice.'" It would be kind of like saying, "I'm going to be a healthy person, I'm going to change my diet and eat better." The second thing I said further clarifies what the first thing means. So it's safe to say according to scripture, righteousness cannot dwell where justice is not done.

One reason justice feels so political and polarized is because we have different definitions of justice and ideas on how to go about enacting it. An eye for an eye is a form of justice. But if you carry that to its logical conclusion, you end up treating someone who accidentally hurt someone exactly the same as someone who maliciously

inflicts harm on someone else. And I think a lot of us don't want to live in a world where that's true. Survival of the fittest is a form of justice. But that's a reality a lot of us don't want to see. If you carry that to its conclusion, there's no room to protect the "weak" or the marginalized. So as followers of Jesus, we need to look to Jesus and how he defines and enacts justice.

So what exactly *is* justice according to the bible? One biblical scholar, Bruce Waltke, puts it this way: he says, "the word 'mishpat' (justice) and its companion word tzedakah (righteousness) in the Old Testament [concludes] the righteous are willing to disadvantage themselves to advantage the community; the wicked are willing to disadvantage the community to advantage themselves." Our mindset towards justice is our perspective of the weak, the poor, the marginalized. That is what scripture is talking about when justice is mentioned. Human beings are created in the image of God, the imago dei, and as a result are worthy of dignity and love and equity. Justice is giving people what they are due, and they are due everything that an image-bearer of God deserves.

So let's get to some specifics. What does this mean? What does it look like to do justice? How do we participate in it as followers of Jesus? Let's talk about what the bible says for a bit.

These will be up on the screen so you don't have to turn there, but let's look at Isaiah 1:17 first:

*Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow.*

This one is particularly interesting in my opinion because it comes right out and says "doing what is right" is seeking justice. It's defending the oppressed. It's taking up someone else's cause. It's not saying doing right and seeking justice is apologizing and repenting for directly oppressing someone. It's saying doing right and seeking justice is defending them *in general, whether their oppression was your fault or not*. Purely because they are oppressed. The next one takes it a step further, look with me at Isaiah 10:1-2:

*Woe to those who make unjust **laws**, to those who issue oppressive **decrees**, to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people, making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless.*

According to this passage, God isn't just opposed to unjust *individuals*, but also to unjust *laws*. Any laws that have as part of their motivation to disadvantage the poor or the widow or the fatherless, or intentionally disadvantaging anyone—that is also injustice. God doesn't just command us to not live unjust lives, but he actually speaks against those who pass *laws* that oppress certain people groups. So any time a law is passed that knowingly and consciously makes life harder for the poor and the orphan and the widow and all the oppressed peoples we've talked about, God says he is against that law. And listen, you may disagree on that definition of justice, but can I just ask that if you do, that you're at least willing to admit that you disagree with the bible's version of justice? You may have your own definition, but what we're talking about today is God's definition.

So if you didn't know before today, I'd like to share with you that justice is a fairly significant topic in scripture. And it's certainly something God cares quite a bit about. And just in case anyone is thinking it's only an Old Testament topic, take a quick look at Luke 4:16-21 with me:

*He [Jesus] went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. He began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."*

Super quick summary: Jesus goes to the temple before all the religious leaders and people, opens up the scroll of Isaiah that has a prophecy of someone coming with the Spirit of the Lord in them to proclaim freedom and justice for the oppressed, then says "that's me." If Jesus had a mic, this is when he would've dropped it. So not only is the topic of justice a big deal in general in scripture, Jesus basically just said that's why he was there. Can we all agree, if you're a follower of Jesus, that if God cares about something and Jesus based a large portion of his ministry on it that we should probably care about it too? I do want to take just a second to clarify things that are *not* reasons we participate in doing justice in our world. We don't pursue justice just because it

makes us feel good. We don't pursue justice so we can have bragging rights or a cool new picture for our Instagram feed to show everyone how woke we are. We don't pursue justice because it seems like a good thing to do or because our favorite celebrity posted an inspiring video. Here's one that may sound strange if you grew up in certain church contexts: we don't pursue justice only to convert people to Christianity. I'm sure a lot of people have heard some version of "if you do something good for people and they don't accept Jesus then it was a waste." That's not why we pursue justice either. As Christians, we pursue justice because we want to help make things in our world look more like the way God intended them to look. We pursue justice because it reflects the heart of God. We pursue justice because things are broken in our world and we want to join together to push back against darkness and oppression and the pain and destruction it causes.

So, all that being said, how do we as followers of Jesus actively pursue justice? I think the first step, once we understand that it's our responsibility to pursue it, is to look for and actually *care* about injustice. Now, I'm sure that sounds a little odd, so let me explain. Like we said earlier, most people would agree things aren't as they should be and there's injustice everywhere. But, believe it or not, just agreeing with something has never changed anything. Just acknowledging brokenness and oppression doesn't push back against the darkness and sin in our world that's causing it. And I think a lot of people here would say they do really care about the wrongs they see, and I believe that. And I'm sure people spend plenty of time talking about things they see that are off, and posting on social media, and all that. And talking about issues is important, it's a great way to raise awareness and bring other people's attention to problems, but if that's where it stops what have we changed? What heaven-inspired justice have we worked for and seen? It's so easy for many of us to feel like we've checked our box of social justice because we yelled about it louder than someone else. But we have to move to action and take actual, practical steps to fight injustice. We have to *actually care*. I heard one pastor put it this way, and it was really convicting for me. He said, "when your needs are met, it's very easy to not think about the needs of other people." So our sinful tendency at times actually pulls us away from pursuing justice and instead turns our focus inward. So when we ask the Lord to help turn our focus *outward*, what then can we do?

We mentioned a passage earlier that specifically mentioned laws being made that were oppressive and unjust to certain groups of people and how that was one example of *injustice* in God's eyes. So a great first step is to take the time to learn about your local officials and some of the things they advocate for. And then you have the ability to take

part in making change where change is needed. It may sound like a really non-spiritual approach, but using your right to take part in the process and vote in local elections and use your voice when injustices are being done or perpetuated is an incredibly practical way to start. For clarity, I'm not saying go militantly align yourself with a political party. Local elections, the ones that tend to have the most immediate impact in the communities around us, are all nonpartisan. So I am not pushing a political platform, I am pushing for us to take an active role in pursuing justice at a policy level. But again, I'd say this step is somewhere in between using our voices, which is good but ultimately not enough, and taking action since a vote is only a way to get processes started. We have to keep going forward and find ways to *be* agents for justice in our community.

I think a great area to start is very simply with what a lot of theologians call the quartet of the vulnerable. Scripture talks over and over, specifically when talking about justice, about the widow, the orphan, the poor, and the foreigner. You've probably seen those groups mentioned on repeat already in the passages we've looked at this morning. Essentially four general groups of people that have consistently been victims of injustice throughout history because they are often more socially and economically vulnerable than other groups. Marginalized groups of people exist all throughout our city, and praise God that there are people and organizations actively working to be involved in those areas. We are fortunate enough to live somewhere where work has already begun to push back against injustices, and a great first step for a lot of us is to find those groups and simply ask, "how can I help? What can I do to take part in the work you are doing?" This is something that we as a church have been looking into and working on for a while. We have been communicating with different people and organizations throughout our city to identify ways we can be most helpful in serving in and resourcing some of their amazing work. We're going to roll some things out as we get closer to Christmas that we can all be a part of, which is incredibly exciting to me and something for all of us to look forward to. But in the meantime, we can all still be seeking out opportunities to partner in justice efforts. You don't have to wait until the church at large builds up partnerships. Justice also comes down to individual actions. This could mean going around your neighborhood looking for needs you can meet, maybe with the elderly, or handicapped, or single parent households who could use your help. Maybe it's respectfully putting pressure on your local police department to respond as quickly and effectively in under-resourced neighborhoods as they do in affluent neighborhoods. Maybe you have the means to partner with an under-resourced school to help improve learning conditions or classroom experiences. Maybe you can be part of starting an organization that takes a stand against predatory lending companies that prey on and

exploit the poor or elderly in your community. Maybe you can prayerfully consider opening your home for foster care.

Possibly the most tangible way to begin participating in justice is to start with the source of justice. Remember, we said the whole reason we are motivated to pursue this justice is because we want to pursue the heart of Jesus. So what better way to begin than to look to Jesus as an example. The bulk of Jesus' ministry was all about giving a voice to the voiceless, loving and welcoming the outsider, caring for the outcast, confronting oppression, and much more. What if we looked at the life and ministry of Jesus in Scripture and we just started there. Jesus didn't withdraw from people, he walked alongside the oppressed. He drew close to the outcast, the destitute, the lowly. He was in relationship with the hurt and the marginalized. But not only that, this was also his posture towards some of the oppressors. Jesus ate with tax collectors and pharisees who often were agents of oppression in their society. But Jesus engaged with all these people, and he did it through relationships. And we have to look at his example.

Because he's the whole reason for any of this. What God did for us in sending Jesus is the only reason for any of this. We have been shown unbelievable, immeasurable grace. Do you realize that? We were completely and utterly lost, separated from God because of our sin, and he sent Jesus to cover the whole cost. He paid for *you* with his life. Everything we have in life is a gift of his grace. Some of us may not like hearing that. We may think "I've put in my work, paid my dues, and that's why I have what I have. My house, my car, my status, I earned it all because I work hard." Tim Keller, a pastor in New York puts that mentality in perspective really well. He gives an illustration where he said if you were born on a mountain in Tibet in the 8th century, it doesn't matter how hard you work or how driven you are, ultimately you wouldn't have much to show for it. You didn't choose when you'd be born. You didn't work hard to be born in America in the 20th century. Some of you didn't work hard for your parents to set you up for success. Everything we have is a result of God's grace, and when we understand that, how can we not be just? How can we not then extend all the grace we can muster towards others?

Over the last 7 weeks we've spent a lot of time talking about different ways of bringing a picture of heaven to earth. In light of the promises we've been given that one day all things will be restored in the New Heaven and New Earth, we've seen different practices we can participate in to begin that process now in our day to day lives. And these are all beautiful realities that we are invited into. But I want to take a little time as we wrap up

our series to tie it all together. I think a temptation that I've noticed, especially in the American church, is finding a groove to settle in. I think in our hyper-individualistic society, we tend to prioritize ourselves and our agendas, then see what we can tweak here and there to squeeze in a spiritual aspect. I feel like we tend to comb through different aspects of scripture and find things we can identify with or can get on board with and say to ourselves, "I can handle that aspect of the Christian life and still maintain my current lifestyle, and someone else with a different lifestyle can pick up one of the others." But that's not a life outlined in scripture. See, the past 7 weeks are not meant to be suggestions for followers of Jesus to pick the ones they feel the best about. The past 7 weeks are meant to be reminders of 7 different things all followers of Jesus are called to participate in. But the most important thing to remember with this is the *reason*. We don't pursue these things so God will approve of us. We don't pursue these things so people will look at us admiringly. We don't reorient our entire lives to make ourselves feel better about what we've accomplished in life. As followers of Jesus, we reorient our entire lives because it's worth it. We do it because the life that Jesus invites us into is worth everything. He paid the ultimate cost for us to have the opportunity to be in right relationship with him, and now he invites us to take part in bringing that reality to the rest of the world.