

Do Justice 6 - Colonies of Heaven on Earth (The New Testament Church)
Yesterday's Sermon Summary



1. We wrapped up our biblical tour of justice yesterday by looking at how the earliest (or New Testament era) church pursued and practiced it. It's important to recognize up front that the church didn't think that it had a mission of its own but were just a continuation of Christ's own mission. What they were taught by Christ, they taught others; what they saw in Christ, they tried to live.
2. Within a year of Jesus' death and resurrection, the early church became known for its practice of countercultural generosity ([Acts 2.44-45](#); [4.32-35](#)), so much so that "there was not a needy person among them" (4.34). Willie James Jennings, a professor at Yale Divinity School, describes this practice as follows: "In Acts, we see a community that refused to let the market dictate human worth. To have 'all things in common' was not an abstract spiritual state; it was a concrete, visceral refusal of Rome's economy of exploitation. It was an announcement that in Christ, my neighbor's economic vulnerability is my theological responsibility."
3. Not long afterward, racism and ethnic favoritism began to show its ugly head in the first church: Jewish widows from Palestine and Jerusalem were given priority over Jewish widows from elsewhere. The apostles saw this as an urgent matter and created the role we now call "deacons" to ensure the fair, equitable distribution of food and care ([Acts 6.1-7](#)).
4. The very first letter written in our New Testament came only 10-15 years after Jesus' resurrection, and it's all about justice, inclusion, and fairness. James, written by Jesus' half-brother, decried the favoritism shown to the wealthy and powerful in the early churches, and called such partiality and bias no less than "sin" and a violation of Jesus' own teaching ([James 2.1-13](#)). He also called out the economic exploitation of poor laborers by the rich ([5.1-6](#)).
5. Justice, generosity, and inclusion are no less present in the writings of the apostle Paul. Upon being vetted by the early church leaders, Paul was given a thumbs up to continue his ministry among Greco-Romans with one mandate - "remember the poor" ([Galatians 2.10](#)). This is why he gets so angry that the rich are leaving the poor unfed and hungry at church meals, while themselves eating plenty ([1st Corinthians 11.17-34](#)). This is also why he spent years asking the more affluent church in the eastern Mediterranean to give and send money to help support the poorer Judean/Jerusalem church that was suffering under famine (2 Corinthians 8-9; Romans 15). For Paul, hoarding and indifferent abundance is no less than spiritual failure.
6. Let's pause our flyover of the early church and ask here - what would it look like for us to "do justice" like they did? First, we'd define justice biblically, beginning with what we see and hear in Jesus, not culturally. This then would make us MORE generous, equitable, just, and inclusive than the norms of the society in which we live. And we would not wait for our society to offer the care necessary for the marginalized or disadvantaged; we'd take the initiative to create the systems or care needed. As Henri Nouwen wrote, "The world says: 'When you are normal, healthy, and productive, we love you.' But the Church must say: 'We love you because you are a child of God, no matter your brokenness.' To love as Christ loved means going to the places where society sees no value, and declaring infinite worth."

7. So let's finish by focusing on two texts in Paul's writings that explain the "why" behind these countercultural practices of the N. T. church. First, consider Galatians 3.28, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." These three pairs represent a radical disjunction from the norms of Greco-Roman culture; they are an open confrontation of what was unquestioned and acceptable in normal society. As biblical scholar Richard Longenecker puts it, "This verse is the cultural and social mandate of the gospel. It is no less than a theological hand grenade."

8. Second, in [Ephesians 6.12](#) Paul writes that Christians do not struggle against "flesh and blood" but against "rulers, authorities, cosmic/world power, and spiritual forces." Those terms would have been crystal-clear in the ancient world: they are both titles for legal, economic, and political figures in the Roman empire and labels used for the lesser gods that governed so much of everyday life. So, in short, Paul is saying that we wrestle not against individual human beings as much as the abiding structures and systems in which we live, and the ideologies, presuppositions, and overarching forces that shape and drive them.

9. So for us to "do justice" like the first Christians, our inclusivity and equality would break, defy, and go far beyond cultural norms and biases. Also, we wouldn't demonize individuals and instead recognize that our real struggle is against the prevailing ideas, motives, systems, and structures that dominate society. To that end, British theologian and missionary Leslie Newbign writes, "The church's mission is to confront the powers - the ideologies, the political and economic systems that claim ultimate authority - by proclaiming that Jesus, not the state nor the market, is Lord. To be silent in this public witness is to fail our mission entirely."

10. Taken all together, our quick jaunt through the early church's practice of equality, justice, and inclusion would lead us to conclude as does theologian Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz: "Our struggle for justice is how we make God's Kingdom visible in the world...When we stand against the oppressive powers of our day, we are continuing the work of those early Christian communities who looked at the power of Rome and said, 'No, there is another way to be human together.'"

The Early Church and Justice this Week

- As mentioned in the sermon, the first letter written during the era of the New Testament church was James, and it has A LOT to say about justice, equity, and partiality. It'd be a good read this week, and it's only five chapters long: [James 1-5 NRSVUE](#). This is a detailed presentation of a) poverty in the Roman empire, b) how the post-New Testament church empowered and enfolded the poor, and c) what we today can learn from their example: [viewcontent.cgi](#)

- Here's a piece that ties together the justice theme in Jesus, Paul, and the book of Revelation: [Justice in the New Testament](#)

Suggested Reading

Now that we've come to the end of our "Do Justice" series, here's some recommended reading. You can usually preview these books by finding YouTube interviews or presentations by the authors.

- Here are two general overviews of justice in the Bible. The first is short and succinct; the second does a great job of applying biblical justice to contemporary American issues (legal, economic, etc.):
 - [The Little Book of Biblical Justice: A Fresh Approach to the Bible's Teaching on Justice \(The Little Books of Justice and Peacebuilding Series\): Chris Marshall](#)
 - [We Cry Justice: Reading the Bible with the Poor People's Campaign: Liz Theoharis, William J. Barber II](#)
- Here's a daily devotional centered on social justice:
 - [On Love & Mercy: A Social Justice Devotional: Mattson, Stephen](#)
- Here's a good Bible study on justice:
 - [God of Justice: The IJM Institute Global Church Curriculum: George, Abraham, Toyama-Szeto, Nikki A.](#)
- Here are two wonderful resources on the soulwork or personal spiritual grounding/practices necessary to pursue justice over the long haul:
 - [The Soulwork of Justice: Four Movements for Contemplative Action: Granberg-Michaelson, Wesley](#)
 - [Hope Is Here!: Spiritual Practices for Pursuing Justice and Beloved Community: Smith Jr., Luther E.](#)
- If our week on the Old Testament prophets was intriguing to you, here are two works on how they can be instructive to us today as we seek to carry on their legacy and protest:
 - [Reality, Grief, Hope: Three Urgent Prophetic Tasks: Brueggemann, Walter](#)
 - [The Tears of Things: Prophetic Wisdom for an Age of Outrage: Rohr, Richard](#)
- Last, here are two good, accessible works on the centrality of justice in the teaching and ministry of Jesus:
 - [The Justice of Jesus: Reimagining Your Church's Life Together to Pursue Liberation and Wholeness \(How the Local Church Can Examine Its Preaching, Budget, and Theology for the Good of Its Neighbors\): Joash P. Thomas](#)
 - [What If Jesus Was Serious about Justice?: A Visual Guide to the Good News of God's Judgment and Mercy: Skye Jethani](#)