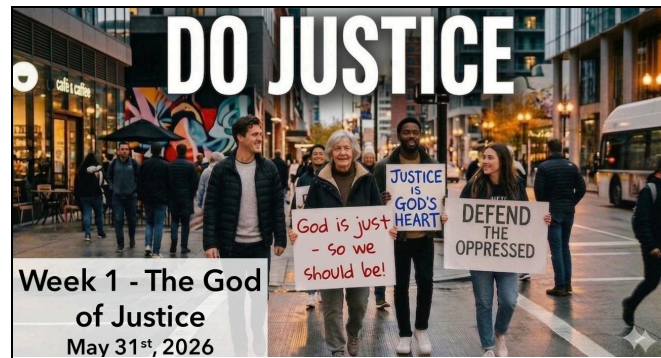


Do Justice (Week 1) - The God of Justice Yesterday's Sermon Summary

1. Two weeks ago, we finished a six Sunday series on one of the terms/ideas that unites all of scripture - love. Yesterday, we started another six week series on a second concept that also underlies the entire Bible from cover to cover, and one that is inseparably tied to the first - justice.



2. Yesterday's sermon was introductory and was oriented around two foundational questions, the first of which is "What is justice?" We first need to recognize that how we define "justice" is largely a product of our "tribes" - our affinity groups, the voices we trust and from whom we learn, etc. So for many how they understand justice is purely a function of their preferred political party or their family background, that's it. Another example would be that our American culture tends to think about justice individually (individual rights, personal autonomy and agency, and so on), which is not wrong but very narrow and specific.

3. Moreover, there are some universal forces that affected all human beings about justice. First, sociologist W. E. B. DuBois has illustrated that in almost all societies it's the powerful who define justice for everyone, which then also means that if you're not in that group you must learn to live within those constraints and accept the harsh realities of any oversight or neglect. Second, theologian Miroslav Volf has noted that many cultures tend to think of justice more as punishment or punitive (a paying back for wrongs done) and in so doing lose any potential healing that justice might offer, which explains why all too often justice in a culture ends up being more unjust than just.

4. All that being said, we end up with the same conclusion drawn by New Zealand theologian Chris Marshall - for human beings, justice is a paradox...we know deep in our bones in that justice is important, in fact one of most important virtues for any person or community, and yet we're so often clueless about what justice actually is.

5. For those of us in the Judeo-Christian tradition, we turn to scripture as our starting line about justice. In the Old Testament, there are two words often paired together that, taken as a unit, give us window in what scripture has to say about justice. First of those words is "justice" (mishpat in Hebrew). It has two primary emphases: a) justice rectifies - it sets right that which is wrong, it makes whole, and it makes amends interpersonally and in society; b) justice is equitable - everyone should be treated without bias, favoritism, or prejudice, regardless of social status (e.g., "the quartet of the vulnerable" - widows, orphans, foreigners/immigrants, the poor).

6. The second term often paired with justice is "righteousness" (tzedakah): this is primarily a relational and covenantal word - it involves a deep, immovable commitment to one another, and it is a willingness and obligation to do whatever is needed to maintain or heal the community (the family, the neighborhood, the nation, etc.). Thus, righteousness is an obligation to pursue justice, and as we pursue justice and see it come to fruition more and more, the communal bond of righteousness is strengthened. The two terms are meant to describe a self-reinforcing cycle.

7. The late Desmond Tutu, Anglican archbishop of South Africa, provided a simple word picture to describe both justice and the communal bond called righteousness. Imagine standing on the banks of a river and pulling people out who had fallen in and were being swept downstream - that's compassion and mercy (like a food pantry or paying someone's rent when they can't). But going upstream and preventing them from falling in to begin with - and that's justice (which can look like advocacy, protest, seeking to provide affordable housing, change laws, etc.). The two of these actions taken together equates to what the Old Testament calls "righteousness."

8. The second question we pondered yesterday was, "What is God like?" And like the first question, our cultural setting and personal background really affects how we answer that question. For example, when asked African-American Christians were quick to describe God as being a God of justice who actively sides with the oppressed, the poor, etc. When white American Christians were asked about God, they were inclined to describe a God who is interested in their individual concerns, their personal morality, saving individuals, and private devotion. Why the difference? It should be pretty obvious - one group has historically dealt with multiple, ongoing injustices, one hasn't.

9. Not surprisingly, you will find that both "justice" and "righteousness" are often ascribed to God and God's character (for example, Psalm 89.14 and Jeremiah 9.24) and in fact that God has special concern for justice being done for and shown to the most vulnerable (Deuteronomy 10.17-18). Thus, justice - a commitment to it, viewing the world through that lens, seeking it at all times - is as much a part of who God is as love; in fact, it's not possible for God to be all-loving if God isn't also equally committed to justice. As reformer John Calvin wrote, "Therefore, we cannot conceive of God without His justice; it is as essential to Him as His life."

10. Where do we go from here? Over the next five weeks of the series, we are going to take a tour of most of the major sections of scripture - Mosaic law, wisdom literature, prophets, Gospels, and N.T. letters - and discover what they have to tell us about justice. Also, between 6/14 and 6/28 we'll be offering an 11am class and discussion on justice - come and join us!

Doing Justice this Week

How can you "do justice" this week, drawing from what we covered in the sermon?

1. Spend some time thinking through what forces and groups have influenced how you view "justice," and perhaps how they've limited your perspective.
2. As you listen to the news or hear about different issues, prioritize how they might affect the most vulnerable, the poor, or the marginalized...and in so doing, know that you're beginning to look at things more like God does.
3. Ask God for the opportunity to a) pull someone out of the river, and b) help someone not fall in the river (or speak up for those who are in danger of falling into the river.)
4. One day this week try to stay conscious of the fact that God wants justice for each and every person you see or with whom you interact. God doesn't just love them as beloved children; God wants justice for them. This kind of intentional practice will change both your heart and the way you see the world.

A Prayer for Justice this Week

Just and righteous God, forgive me when I mistake my own cultural biases, political leanings, and economic privileges for biblical justice. In short, forgive me for believing in my own perspective on justice too much and on Yours too little.

Open my eyes to see Your image equally in every human being and to perceive the harsh realities experienced by those who are marginalized, undervalued, and overlooked. As I embark on this justice journey over the coming weeks, disrupt my complacency and convict my heart about what justice requires from me. Remind me daily, Lord, that I cannot speak of love unless I also seek justice for one and all, The joy, peace, dignity, and provision I want for myself is what I should want and pursue for everyone.

I pray this so that Your justice might roll down like waters, and Your righteousness like an ever-flowing stream, beginning right here within my own life, relationships, church, community, and country, amen.