

This morning, I am beginning a new sermon series that I have titled “Justice.” If you’ve listened to me preach, you know that my typical style is to work through a book of the Bible or a specific passage of Scripture, looking at what it meant in its original context and what it means for us today. But usually about once every year I preach a more topical sermon series, especially if I feel there is something important for us to focus on. Last year, I did a sermon series on lament and suffering, which I felt was important given the amount of loss many of us were dealing with. And this fall, I will be preaching a sermon series on justice.

I think that this past year and a half has been particularly noteworthy for two focuses: the pandemic, and the increased focus in our world on what is called “social justice.” If you work for a large company, or in a school system, I would bet that you have probably received some kind of justice-focused education over the past year, as school districts and corporations try to fall in line with the way our culture is defining justice. I have been wanting to do a sermon series for months now examining the topic of justice Biblically, as it is so important to evaluate the messages we are getting from our culture in the light of what God says in Scripture. But the problem is that justice is a huge topic, with many voices and books and opinions out there on subjects ranging from racial justice to economic inequalities to prison reform to immigration to LGBTQ justice and women’s rights to voting rights, and on and on and on. So this sermon series, which I originally wanted to do in the spring, kept getting pushed back as I kept reading more books and listening to divergent voices. And now, even though I don’t feel entirely ready, I’m diving in. Let me begin by making three opening comments:

First, this will not be a political sermon series or a social science lecture series. Our church is not a captor to a political party. This sermon series is not about trying to convert anyone into a Democrat or Republican; this sermon series is about the kingdom of God and what God has to say about justice. I am going to try not to get caught in the weeds of specifics like immigration policy or welfare reform that are really not my lane. I am also not a philosopher or social scientist, so I will not be going into the weeds of critical race theory or other theories that would take years to truly understand. I am going to try to stay in my lane. I am a pastor. That means my primary goal is to help you know Jesus and follow Him better. I hope to open up the Bible in order to give you principles that will inform a Biblical worldview on justice and show why it is preferable to the different worldviews out there, so that you can walk faithfully with Jesus by loving God and loving your neighbor.

Secondly, I recognize that this is a dangerous subject to tackle these days. I will be addressing the sort of subjects that can get a man canceled these days by the

Internet mobs who demand that you only speak and believe what they allow you to speak and believe. But I think it's vital to tackle this subject, whether or not everyone agrees with me, or whether or not anyone agrees with what the Bible says. And in the church, as opposed to our culture, I believe we should model speaking the truth in love. If you disagree with me on something I say, or have other insights or experience that you feel would enhance my understanding or my teaching, please speak up. Consider this an invitation to a conversation. I hope that I will speak with humility and compassion but also with conviction.

Thirdly, I am convinced that the Bible has the best approach to justice. I am convinced that where you see other justice movements taking root in our culture, it should be an indictment on the church that we have not been successful in doing justice as God commands. I believe that if we were truly doing justice the way the Bible lays it out, there would be no need for competing visions of justice because of how our world would be amazed at how Christians love their neighbor and work towards a just society. Therefore, understand that my primary concern is not to help us collectively wag our finger at the world for acting like the world. My primary audience is the church, to challenge us to do better in this area. And I definitely include myself in that. But, nevertheless, even if you do not believe, there will be something in what I say for you as well.

Having said all that, let me begin in the beginning. This sermon will not be an exegesis of a long passage, but a deep dive into one verse and the important truth contained in that verse:

***Genesis 1:1 - In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.***

In the beginning, God created. I think this is the best place to begin our conversation on justice. The first element of the Biblical worldview is that there is a God, and that this God is the creator. Specifically, let me say two things about that which are relevant to our discussion on justice:

- 1) He designed everything in this world, including us, and knows how it all should work

***Revelation 4:11 - "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being."***

**John 1:3** - *Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.*

He created it. He designed it. And because he designed it, he knows how it should run.

My wife loves to tag sale. Sometimes, she will bring home something like a lawn mower, where it's not obvious to me how to get it to work, leaving me with a couple of options. I could try to figure it out myself. Or I could find the model number and google it to see if I can find a manual, and follow those instructions to get it to work. I can just use however I want and hope I don't break it, or I could listen to the one who designed it about how it should run, how to take care of it, and how to use it.

This idea, that God designed everything and knows how it all should work, is so important. After all, how do you know if something is good or bad unless you know what it was created for? Is this a good or bad microphone? It depends on what it is for. If I am trying to hammer a nail, then it is bad. But if I am trying to preach, it is good, because it amplifies my voice. I can't tell you whether this is good or bad unless I know it's purpose, what a microphone is for. In the same way, we can't really have a discussion about what is good and bad, right and wrong, just and unjust, without understanding our purpose, what we are here for. If we are just random accidents of natural selection, then there is no objective purpose, no intentional design, and therefore no real concept of good and bad, just and unjust. In order to know what our purpose is or how we have been designed, we need to understand our Creator.

## 2) He is the Lord, with authority over everything

God created everything, and so He is the Lord, the ruler over everything.

**Colossians 1:15-16** - *He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. <sup>16</sup> For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him.*

God is the Lord and has authority over everything. In other words, we are not God. We are not in charge. The world revolves around him, and not us.

The first important thing to consider when we talk about justice is that God is the creator. He designed everything and knows how it should run, and he is Lord, having authority over everything. Any true understanding of justice begins with this reality.

Now, **studies show** that our culture is moving away from belief in a creator, a designer. According to Pew Research Center, the number of people who identify as Christian in America dropped from 78% to 65% from 2007-2019. On the flip side, the number of people who are religiously unaffiliated, the “nones,” rose from 16% to 26%. There might be a belief in God among some of the religiously unaffiliated, but it is not the God of Christianity; it is a more generic supreme being.

As a result of this shift, I would argue that an increasing number of people in our culture believe and live as if there is no creator, no designer. More and more people are not concerned with how a God may want them to live. Instead, an increasing number of people believe and live as if they have the freedom to be self-creators, self-designers, to be whoever they choose to be and to live however they choose to live. This is a very attractive message, because it is a message that declares that you answer to no one, that happiness is found not by conforming to some external standards, but rather by looking inward, figuring out who you are and what you want, and then giving expression to that, and expecting the world to affirm that.

Charles Taylor called this a mark of the age of authenticity, which he explained this way:

*I mean the understanding of life which emerges with the Romantic expressivism of the late-eighteenth century, that each one of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one's own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from outside, by society, or the previous generation, or religious or political authority.*

Another great term for this is “expressive individualism.” As Carl Trueman puts it, “*Expressive individualism particularly refers to the idea that in order to be fulfilled, in order to be an authentic person, in order to be genuinely me, I need to be able to express outwardly or perform publicly that which I feel I am inside.*”

This belief is the cultural water in which we now swim. And it is understandably very attractive to many people. And I believe that any conversation about justice has to begin with the question of whether or not we are created people or random

accidents of natural selection who are free to live however we please. But I would argue this morning that not only is it true that there is a creator, but finding your identity as a created being is far superior to living in a world of self-created people who are all living however they choose to live.

So why is living however you choose to live not the best way to live? Why is it better to live according to the creator? Three reasons:

### 1) The self-created life leads to internal chaos

Why are rates of anxiety and depression skyrocketing? I would argue that it is partly due to this shift from living according to the way we were designed to becoming self-creators, moving from a people who gain our identity from God to people who are trying to forget our own identity. Living as if there is no creator, no designer, leads to internal chaos. Why? Because this approach is confusing and fragile.

First of all, it's confusing to look within for your identity, because your deepest desires so often contradict. They are not aligned. I really love this person, but I really want this career. I can't have both. So which desire is the real me?

As Francis Spufford wrote in his book *Unapologetic*, “*You are a being whose wants make no sense, don't harmonize: whose desires, deep down, are discordantly arranged, so that you truly want to possess and you truly want not to, at the very same time. You're equipped, you realize, for farce (or even tragedy) more than you are for happy endings.*”

And, of course, your desires change over time. Some of you may have heard of the book “*Irreversible Damage: The transgender craze seducing our daughters*” by Abigail Shrier. She contends that we are riding a wave of rapid onset gender dysphoria, a phenomenon in which adolescents develop gender dysphoria over a short period in conjunction with one or more peers. Over the past decade, the number of teenage girls identifying as transgender has increased 4,000%, with puberty blockers, testosterone, and surgery, all with irreversible effects, being administered to girls who are claiming that they feel they were born into the wrong body. Now, it's possible that the increasing acceptance of transgender people is the reason for this. But it's also possible that this is a social contagion, where girls, who are already going through the challenges of adolescence and unsure about who they are and unhappy with their bodies, are listening to influencers and peers and believing that they are actually a man in a woman's body. But what will

happen when some of these women who have transitioned to living as men discover that it wasn't what they thought it would be, or that their discomfort has not gone away?

Secondly, it is not only confusing, but looking within for your identity is also an incredibly fragile way to live. After all, the way of expressive individualism is that you look within to figure out who you are and what you want, and you express that to the world, and the world must affirm you. You can't let anyone else tell you who you are; you must determine for yourself who you are. But you can't validate yourself. You are a relational being, and you need the validation and affirmation of others. Think about it: can anyone really believe, "Everyone else thinks I'm a terrible person, but I think I'm amazing"? "Everyone else says I'm ugly, but I think I'm beautiful!" No – we can't help but get our identity in part from the voices around us. So what happens when we are trying to live as our own creators, our own designers? We end up needing more affirmation than ever. We are constantly neurotic and can never get enough validation. And anyone who disagrees with me is attacking my identity. This is why the derogatory label "snowflake" gets thrown around and some members of the younger generation who get outraged when people question or disagree with them or who dare not to validate and affirm their self-expression.

We are fragile. Take away a Creator, and we are ultrasensitive to criticism and in desperate need of validation. Without trusting in a God who has created and designed us, we are left looking more than ever to romantic relationships or career success to validate us. Despite the claim that only we can decide what is right and wrong for us, we end up overly sensitive and in need of the validation of others.

## 2) The self-created life leads to cultural chaos

What do you get when you have an increasing number of people who believe that the way to forge an identity is to look within, to be a self-creator, a self-designer, to give expression to what we find inside, and expect the world to affirm us? I don't think you get greater peace and harmony. Instead, you get increasing cultural chaos, hatred, and division.

For example, consider the explosion in genders and pronouns. In 2014, Facebook changed to offering 58 options for gender: Agender, Androgyne, Androgynous, Bigender, Cis, Cisgender, Cis Female, Cis Male, Cis Man, Cis Woman, Cisgender Female, Cisgender Male, Cisgender Man, Cisgender Woman, Female to Male, FTM, Gender Fluid, Gender Nonconforming, Gender Questioning, Gender

Variant, Genderqueer, Intersex, Male to Female, MTF, Neither, Neutrois, Non-binary, Other, Pangender, Trans, Trans\*, Trans Female, Trans\* Female, Trans Male, Trans\* Male, Trans Man, Trans\* Man, Trans Person, Trans\* Person, Trans Woman, Trans\* Woman, Transfeminine, Transgender, Transgender Female, Transgender Male, Transgender Man, Transgender Person, Transgender Woman, Transmasculine, Transsexual, Transsexual Female, Transsexual Male, Transsexual Man, Transsexual Person, Transsexual Woman, Two-Spirit.

Recently, they pared that list down to 14 plus a custom field: Now it looks like this: Agender, Androgynous, Bigender, Cisgender, Cis Woman, Cis Man, Non-binary, Gender Fluid, Gender Questioning, Transgender, Trans Woman, Trans Man, Transgender Person, Two-Spirit, Custom (A freeform field to enter your own gender).

There are men and women who experience gender dysphoria and feel as if they are in the wrong body. There are some who live in that tension, and some who undergo surgery so that they can feel more at home in their body. That is undoubtedly a difficult thing to experience, and these individuals deserve our empathy and not our judgment or condemnation. My point in bringing up this example is that, as a culture, we have blown way past the transgender thing to a whole other level. There are new videos out all the time on YouTube or TikTok about new terms to define yourself, new pronouns you can use (slide).

Here is my point: if we are all self-creators, self-definers who choose for ourselves who we are and how we live and how people should refer to us, then first of all, there are an infinite number of pronouns and identities and ways you expect people to refer to you. But more importantly, no one can tell you that you are wrong without “doing violence” to your identity, without you feeling as if they are questioning your very existence.

Is this leading to freedom and a better world? Or is this leading to internal and cultural chaos? I would argue that it is leading to chaos.

Without acknowledging that there is a creator who has designed you, and coming to an understanding of what that design is, we are left with a culture full of people choosing for themselves what is good and bad, right and wrong, and no one is allowed to say they are wrong without being accused of phobias and doing violence to their identity. Without a creator, we can no longer ground right and wrong, justice and injustice, to any sacred order. **Instead, the world is all about personal preference.** It is a world of competing tastes. I like this, you don't. I think

this is good, you don't. And no one knows what is true or right or good. Reminds me of one of the most chaotic periods in Israel's history:

*Judges 17:6 - In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.*

Contrary to what our culture teaches, the self-created life does not lead to freedom and happiness, but to internal and cultural chaos. But there is a better way:

### 3) True freedom is not the absence of restriction, but is submission to our design

I believe our culture defines freedom essentially as the absence of restriction. In other words, the free person is the one who is free to choose to be or do whatever he or she wants, throwing off the shackles of parents, religion, and society's expectations, and nobody can tell them what is right or wrong for them. It is the attitude that says, to quote William Shakespeare: *This above all; to thine own self be true*. It is expressive individualism, the conviction that the most important thing is to look inward, to find out who you truly are and what you truly desire, and then to live that out, no matter what others say. To not let anyone else tell you what you can and can not do, or who you can or can not be.

This attitude seems self-evident to us in America today. We believe that we are basically good people with good desires who should have the right and the freedom to live as we please, without anyone telling us what to do. That in order to be fulfilled and free, we need to be able to follow our inward desires and beliefs and others need to affirm those.

But true freedom is not the absence of restrictions. In every area of life, true freedom comes when you submit to your design, submit to the right restrictions, to the life-giving restrictions. Consider some analogies: Freedom for the **fish** is not going on dry land. What about the bird: freedom for the **bird** is not swimming. Freedom for the **pianist** is not just playing whatever keys they want, but disciplining herself to the rules of the piano until she can freely play anything. Freedom for the **basketball player** is not doing whatever he wants, but submitting himself to the rules of the game and the best possible training until he can do anything on a basketball court. Freedom for the **car owner** is not doing whatever he wants to his car, but submitting to the scheduled maintenance so that the car will perform at its best for a long time. In every area of life, freedom as the absence of restrictions, as the ability to indulge every desire, does not lead to life but to chaos, to breakdown, and to death. In every other realm of life, violating the design leads

to chaos, breakdown, and death. And yet somehow, our culture has come to believe that if we can all just have the freedom to look within and choose our own path, that the world will be a better place.

So what is true freedom? True freedom is not the absence of restriction, but submitting to the right restrictions, to the life-giving restrictions. True freedom is living as you were designed to live, as God intended you to live. You can not know that without reading and submitting to His Word.

*<sup>16</sup> Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God.*

According to Peter, these are the right restrictions: you were created to serve God, to live for Him, to glorify Him and enjoy Him forever. **If that is true, then that means that your authentic self, your true self, your best life, will not be found by living as a self-created, self-designed, autonomous individual, looking within and living according to the desires you find in there, but will only be found by looking to God and living according to the will of the one who designed you, as you submit to His design for you and serve Him.**

***Micah 6:8** - He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.*

Justice begins with acknowledging that there is a Creator, one who has designed everything, including you and me, and who has determined what is right and what is wrong, what is just and what is unjust. Recognizing that He loves you so much that He died for you, and now nothing can separate you from His love.

***John 3:16** - "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*

True freedom comes not from casting off this creator and looking inside to figure out who you are, but in looking to Him and submitting to His design for you.

In upcoming weeks, we'll look more closely at how we were designed, and what the implications are for justice in this world.