

This fall, I am preaching a sermon series I have entitled “Justice,” looking at what the Bible has to say about justice and how to evaluate the cultural messages on justice that are all around us. I’m going slowly through this series, trying not to take on too much at once. Each week, I begin with three preliminary comments, which I want to repeat this week. First of all, this is not primarily a political sermon series or a social science lecture series. I will be trying to stay in my lane as a pastor, helping our church to know Jesus and to better love Him and love your neighbor. Secondly, as I said last week, I recognize that I will be addressing some sensitive subjects, and I do not expect everyone to agree with every word I speak. I do expect, however, that we will 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, or if something I say does not sit well with you, please speak up. Consider this an invitation to a conversation. And thirdly, my goal in this series is not to help us wag our finger at the world for acting like the world, but to challenge the church to do better in this area.

In the first week, we looked at how we are created, designed beings, not self-designed people. Despite the reality that our world is increasingly trying to convince us that the path to happiness is to look within, discover who we are, and then give expression to that and expect the world to affirm and applaud us, true joy and purpose is found in living according to God’s design for us. In the second week, we looked at how we have all been created in the image of God, and the reason that any life matters is because of that truth. Last week, we addressed the question of what is wrong with the world, and how vital it is to understand the concept of sin if you are going to do justice in this world.

I will eventually be getting into some of the specifics of the Bible’s heart for justice and what it means to do justice as a follower of Jesus. But before we get there, we have to address something that I think is vital to understand if you want to do justice. Let me begin with prayer.

You need to adapt your lifestyle to combat global warming and climate change. You need to fight against consumerism and its effects on the lower class. When are you going to start to support prison reform and work against laws that imprison people unjustly? And how are you helping those who have been freed from prison to transition into society? What are you doing about inequalities in education, or to make college more affordable for working class people? How are you addressing economic inequalities in America or around the world for that matter? Why are you not doing anything about those in the foster care system, those children without homes or families? What about reducing the number of abortions in your

community and providing aid to women with unwanted pregnancies? And what about the elderly who go uncared for and unloved in nursing homes? Why are you not doing more about voting rights, redlining, and gerrymandering? Why are you not more concerned about fair elections? How can you sleep at night when millions around the world go without clean water or basic hygiene needs? What about immigration? How are you not aware of the problem of land grabbing around the world? Why are you not doing more for gender equality? Racial equality? What about the rights of the LGBTQ community? Why are you not sharing your excess with victims of natural disasters, like the Haitians, who have lost nearly everything? What are you doing about unjust war? And why are you not more concerned about terrorism? Why are you not speaking out against genocides around the globe? Aren't you upset by the torture practices that our US government performs on prisoners of war? What are you doing about human trafficking around the world? Do you not understand that people are being trafficked under your nose, in your community, while you do nothing about it? What are you doing to encourage sustainable agriculture and farming practices? Are you buying fair trade coffee and chocolate and clothing? Why are you not more concerned about underrepresentation of minority groups in Hollywood? What about #metoo, the abuse and mistreatment of our women? What about #churchtoo, the abuse and mistreatment of women and minors in the church? Why are you not more concerned about universal healthcare for all, or why the rich have more access to medical resources than the poor? Why are you not doing more for the differently abled? What are you doing to combat homelessness or to lift people out of poverty? Why aren't you doing more to advocate for affordable housing for people? What about the effects of the media and social media on body image, especially in teenage girls? Are you not paying attention to rising rates of anxiety, depression, and suicide? Shouldn't you be more concerned with advocating for people's mental health? How are you helping those with addictions or combatting the opioid crisis? How can you let so many around the world die from COVID-19 while Americans have excess vaccines that they have to throw away? How do you sleep at night?

So how are you feeling right now? What I just listed was a sample of the justice issues that are out there in our culture right now. And I am sure that I missed some along the way. There has been a resurgence of interest in social justice in our culture, and while some causes, such as racial equality and climate change and LGBTQ issues, may get the headlines, the more you open your eyes and look carefully around the world, the more you become aware that there are an **overwhelming number of justice issues out there**. Truly, these days it seems like

you can not even wear or eat anything or drive to church without contributing in some way to injustice in the world.

As Michael, the character played by Ted Danson in NBC's *The Good Place* said, "These days just buying a tomato at a grocery store means that you are unwittingly supporting toxic pesticides, exploiting labor, contributing to global warming."

So, if there truly are that many justice issues out there, then what is the proper response to the list I gave you in the beginning? When you truly consider the monumental task that is overcoming injustice in this world, what are your options? Sure you can ignore it and just choose to live a self-centered life without concern for others. But if you want to respond by doing justice or fighting injustice, I see four options:

### 1) Seek justice until you achieve it or burn out trying

As I was preparing for this week's sermon, I came across a fascinating article online by someone named Conor Barnes, who wrote:

*Quoted in JM, the anarchist professor Richard Day proposes "infinite responsibility": "we can never allow ourselves to think that we are 'done,' that we have identified all of the sites, structures, and processes of oppression 'out there' or 'in here,' inside our own individual and group identities." Infinite responsibility means infinite guilt, a kind of Christianity without salvation: to see power in every interaction is to see sin in every interaction. All that the activist can offer to absolve herself is Sisyphean effort until burnout.*

Sisyphus is the Greek mythological character who was condemned to forever pushing a boulder up a hill, only to have it roll down again when he neared the top. His point is that if there truly are as many justice issues as I mentioned in my list, then how do you conceive of your responsibility, if you claim to care about justice? All you can do is keep pushing the boulder up the hill until you burn out.

I think that one of the intriguing things about this new emphasis on social justice has been, as Barnes put it, **a renewed sense of guilt**, a recognition of not only responsibility but of our failure to live up to that responsibility. In the days when everything was relative, people felt less guilty, because there was not so much of a consensus on right and wrong, and what is right for you might not be right for me. But now that there is such a push for justice, accompanying it has been an increase in feelings of guilt as people feel like they are not doing enough or are contributing

to injustice in the world. But this guilt, as Barnes points out, is a guilt without salvation, a guilt that can never be taken away.

We have been reading through the Bible in 2021, and we just started the New Testament this past Friday. One of the assumptions about the Old and New Testament is that the Old Testament is full of laws, while the New Testament is more about love. But that is not entirely accurate. Think of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. He takes the OT laws and then raises the bar higher and higher – you have heard it was said “Do not commit adultery, but I tell you, don’t even look at a woman lustfully”; “you have heard it was said do not murder but I tell you do not even be angry with your brother” – until finally he reaches a crescendo with these jaw-dropping words in **Matthew 5:48** – “*Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*”

That is the bar that Jesus gives us. It is set at perfection. Infinite responsibility, and infinite guilt. And so your first option to respond to those demands is to seek justice, seek righteousness, seek holiness, until you are good enough, until you achieve, justice, or you burn out trying.

What happens when you try your best and you give your all and you find out that it just isn’t enough, that you can’t reach a place where you are “good enough”? Then what? The quest to find salvation and righteousness through doing good works or being a good enough person has a long history. Consider Martin Luther:

*“Although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would assuage him.”*

In his days as a monk, Luther tried his best to be good enough for God, even lashing his own back bloody, sleeping without a blanket in the subzero German winters, and sitting in a confessional booth six hours a day. Until he finally read Romans and realized that there was a salvation offered that did not depend upon being “Good Enough.”

What the modern-day social justice warriors are learning the hard way is that you can never do enough justice. How can you call yourself someone who cares about social justice because you buy fair trade coffee or put a Black Lives Matter graphic on your Facebook page, when there are a hundred other injustices in the world that you are turning a blind eye to or not addressing? Again, *Infinite responsibility means infinite guilt, a kind of Christianity without salvation... All that the activist can offer to absolve herself is Sisyphean effort until burnout.*

So what is my point? If you want to do justice, recognize the magnitude of what we are talking about, the immensity of the injustice in this world. Your first option is to seek justice until you achieve it or burn out trying.

## 2) Lower the bar

For many people, faced with the magnitude of injustice, the solution to avoiding burnout is to lower the bar. It's the starfish approach. Remember the story?

*One day, an old man was walking along a beach that was littered with thousands of starfish that had been washed ashore by the high tide. As he walked he came upon a young boy who was eagerly throwing the starfish back into the ocean, one by one.*

*Puzzled, the man looked at the boy and asked what he was doing. Without looking up from his task, the boy simply replied, "I'm saving these starfish, Sir".*

*The old man chuckled aloud, "Son, there are thousands of starfish and only one of you. What difference can you make?"*

*The boy picked up a starfish, gently tossed it into the water and turning to the man, said, "I made a difference to that one!"*

Yes, but you let the rest of them die when you went home for dinner, young man.

Remember the end of Schindler's List, where Oskar Schindler, looking out at the sea of people he has saved, breaks down as he realizes that he could have done more? He is overwhelmed by the money he wasted, the car, the gold pin, the things that could have been sold in order to purchase the freedom of more Jews. In a sense, he is right. He is right to recognize that he used money that could have saved lives on things that in the end will not matter. And the only way to assuage his guilt is to convince him that he did enough, that wherever the bar was to be "Good Enough", that he had cleared it.

But when you read the Sermon on the Mount, you find that Jesus does the exact opposite. He raises the bar to perfection. In our eagerness to justify ourselves and declare ourselves "Good Enough," we conveniently set the bar at a height we can reach.

But God does not grade on a curve. The call is to holiness, to perfection, to justice. And if your goal in life is to combat injustice, even if you try to lower the bar, there will always be another cause and another group telling you that you are not doing enough, leaving you with the option of trying to combat all the injustice you can find until you burn out, or lowering the bar and convincing yourself that you are good enough. There is a third option:

### 3) Compare yourself to others

Okay, so if you can never absolve yourself of your responsibility to do justice, then perhaps you can convince yourself of your righteousness by comparing yourself to others. Maybe I'm not perfect, but at least I'm better than those capitalists, those bigots, those patriarchal tyrants.

Again, as Conor Barnes put it, *“Montgomery and Bergman skewer this tendency mercilessly: ‘To remain pious, the [social justice warrior] must reveal new sins ... The new Other is the not-radical-enough, the liberal, the perpetrator, the oppressor.’ Because one’s good moral standing can never be guaranteed, the best way to maintain it is to attack the moral standing of others... turning people into what Freddie DeBoer once dubbed ‘offense archaeologists.’”*

If I can't save myself or achieve a place of “Good enough” by my own good works, then at least I can achieve that by looking down on others. This was the approach Paul addressed in the first 3 chapters of Romans, first calling out the Gentiles for their sins, and then calling out the Jews for finding their righteousness in comparing themselves to the Gentiles:

**Romans 2:1-3** - *You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things. <sup>2</sup> Now we know that God's judgment against those who do such things is based on truth. <sup>3</sup> So when you, a mere man, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment?*

Paul sees how the Jews are finding their righteousness by comparing themselves to the Gentiles, and he calls them out on it.

If you are serious about doing justice, recognize the magnitude of the calling. Realize that you will never do enough to reach a place of “Good enough.” There is



infinite responsibility. You can choose to work and spend yourself until burnout. But there is a better way to do justice:

#### 4) Trust in Jesus, and then go and do justice

The gospel is that even though none of us have measured up to God's perfect standard, even though we have all not only failed to do justice but have been guilty of perpetuating injustice, there is forgiveness. There is absolution. There is a way to be "Good Enough," to be righteous, that does not depend upon how much justice you have done or haven't done or how many good works you have done.

**Romans 3:20-24** - *Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. <sup>21</sup> But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. <sup>22</sup> This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, <sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, <sup>24</sup> and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.*

**Galatians 2:15-16** - *"We who are Jews by birth and not 'Gentile sinners' <sup>16</sup> know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.*

Again, the gospel is that even though none of us have measured up to God's perfect standard, even though we have all not only failed to do justice but have been guilty of perpetuating injustice, there is forgiveness. There is absolution. There is a way to be "Good Enough," to be righteous, that does not depend upon how much justice you have done or haven't done or how many good works you have done. Because Jesus lived perfectly the life we could not live, and died a sacrificial death on the cross in our place, taking the punishment that we deserved for our sins. And so even if the crowd or mob condemns us, or even if our own hearts condemn us, Christ offers forgiveness by His grace.

**Ephesians 2:8-10** - *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- <sup>9</sup> not by works, so that no one can boast. <sup>10</sup> For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*

Notice: you have been saved by grace. You have been reborn, created in Christ Jesus to do good works. You have been chosen by God to go and love mercy, do justice, and walk humbly with God, as it says in Micah 6:8. Now that you have been saved, go and do justice. Doing justice is not optional; it is part of following Christ. We can not lower the bar. But it will not save you. We do justice because we are already saved.

Trying as hard as possible to fight injustice and hoping you don't burn out is not a workable solution in the long run. You can never become "good enough" unless you lower the bar or compare yourself to others that you feel better than.

What will transform you into a person who works for justice without burning out? It is the recognition that Jesus gave up heaven to come down and save you that will transform you. He disadvantaged himself to advantage you. He has made you and everyone else in His image, and to love the least of these is to love Jesus Himself. And it is done by the power of God's Holy Spirit within you, empowering you to love like Jesus.

A great example of this is in Acts 2. At Pentecost, Peter's sermon is not about justice but is about sin and the need for salvation.

*Acts 2:37-38 - When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" <sup>38</sup> Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*

But what happens as a result of thousands of people trusting in Christ for forgiveness and receiving the Holy Spirit? A community of justice and generosity is born.

*Acts 2:41-47 - Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. <sup>42</sup> They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. <sup>43</sup> Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. <sup>44</sup> All the believers were together and had everything in common. <sup>45</sup> Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. <sup>46</sup> Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, <sup>47</sup> praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.*



The right response to God's grace and generosity is to show the same grace and generosity to others. The proper response to Jesus lowering Himself and laying down his life is to do the same for others, in order to lift them up.

***James 2:15-16*** - Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. <sup>16</sup> If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?

I can do that because I know that God loves me and cares for me. He gave His Son:

***Romans 8:31-32*** - What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? <sup>32</sup> He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all-- how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?

And if I know He cares for me, then I can give generously, knowing that He will care for me.

God's grace, and His Holy Spirit, makes us just.