

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. Each week, I have begun with three preliminary comments. 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, 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 the realm of justice.

As we look at what Jesus has to say about justice this morning, I want to camp out on that last point about wagging our finger at the world vs. doing better as the church for a minute. I have many concerns about the social justice movements of our culture. I think they are very dangerous in how they emphasize what divides us, labeling people by group identities based on skin color, religion, sexuality, gender, and so on, and then calling one group oppressors and the other oppressed. I am fairly confident that is going to make things worse rather than emphasizing what we have talked about in this series, that every human being is created in the image of God and therefore deserves to be treated with dignity and respect and to receive the justice they are due. I think the movements of our day are dangerous in how they often use mob violence, whether in person or online, to advance what they consider justice. Using threats and public shaming or canceling is more likely to advance something evil than something good. And I think they are dangerous in how they promote propaganda and certain agendas while silencing dissenting voices, not allowing for true freedom of speech and a seeking of the truth. This is partly why we are doing this sermon series, to give an alternate – and better – view of justice than what the world is offering.

Having said that, one of the dangers for the church is that we can make our focus about arguing against the world’s social justice movements and feel a smug sense of superiority for our theological correctness, while all the while we neglect the reality that the Bible DOES call us to do justice and DOES call us to fight against injustice, even if that justice is not exactly the same as what the world calls justice.

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.*

When we focus primarily on theological arguments and neglect actually doing justice, not only do we fail to love our neighbor as Jesus calls us to, but our witness to the world is one of callous and self-righteous indifference. We end up looking very much like the Pharisees, the religious leaders that Jesus condemned:

Matthew 23:23 - "**Woe to you**, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices-- mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law-- justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former.

In our zeal for God and for theological accuracy, let us not become Pharisees.

This morning, I want to take a look at some of what Jesus had to say about justice and righteousness. Remember from last week: justice, or mishpat, is treating people equitably, giving people what they are due, without bias or partiality. It is not treating people differently because of economic status or race or gender or anything else. Righteousness, or **tsedhaqah**, is having right relationships with God and other people, relationships marked by treating others with fairness and generosity as fellow image-bearers of God.

In that spirit, I want to look in particular this morning at a story Jesus told that illustrates what justice and righteousness look like, a story known as the parable of the Good Samaritan.

The passage begins in Luke 10:25:

Luke 10:25-37 - *On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"*

The scene begins with an expert in the law – not a lawyer, but a theologian, an expert in Jewish Old Testament law – who has come to test Jesus. By using that terminology – test Jesus – it becomes clear that he is not asking this question out of a sincere desire to learn, but because he, like many of the religious leaders, is suspicious of Jesus and is searching for a way to trap him. **Nevertheless, motive aside, the question is important, perhaps the most important question there is:** what do I have to do to inherit eternal life: to be right in God's sight, to enter heaven, to

be saved? But instead of answering the question, Jesus asks the man a question in response:

²⁶ "What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?" ²⁷ He answered: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" ²⁸ "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live." ²⁹ But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

Jesus turns the question back on him. You're an expert in the law – how do you read it? And the man correctly identifies the core of the law – love God and love others, both of which are central to the Old Testament. In fact, Jesus gave the same answer when asked a similar question.

Matthew 22:35-40 - *One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: ³⁶ "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" ³⁷ Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' ³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹ And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' ⁴⁰ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."*

This is the sum of God's law: **Love God** – desire Him above all other people and things, and serve Him with your whole heart, devoting your life to Him. **And love your neighbor as yourself** – care for others and meet their needs with the same intentionality and fervency you do for yourself. Jesus tells the man, **"Do this and you will live"** – **you will have eternal life**. Then Luke writes that the expert in the law wanted to justify himself, so he asks Jesus a follow-up question – and who is my neighbor? **What does it mean to want to justify yourself?** To be justified is to be innocent, to be not guilty, to have met the standard of righteousness. The expert in the law wants to be sure that he has cleared the spiritual hurdle, and so he asks Jesus for clarification on who his neighbor is.

Now, in those days, the understanding of the religious elite was that your neighbor was your fellow Israelite. You were to love and act in love towards your fellow Jewish man or woman, but you were under no obligation towards others outside your nation, especially your enemies. Remember what Jesus said in Matthew 5:43: *"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'"* And so undoubtedly, this expert in the law felt that he had measured up to God's

standard for love, for he loved his Jewish neighbors, and he wanted to see if Jesus agreed. He wanted to justify himself.

But Jesus responds to this man by telling him a parable:

³⁰ In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹ A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. ³² So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho. This would have been a very familiar road to his listeners, one that many Israelites traveled. It was a very dangerous road, known as **the Way of Blood**. The Way of Blood was 17 miles long, running downhill from Jerusalem to Jericho, making its way through barren mountains over rough terrain with caves and large boulders where bands of robbers often hid in order to rob travelers. And this is precisely what happens to the man in the parable. He is robbed, beaten, and left half dead.

But then two men walk by: first a priest, and secondly, a Levite. Priests were servants of God who offered sacrifices for the Jewish people in the temple. And the Levites were men who also served in the temple, but in subordinate roles as assistants, or as police or maintenance. Both men would have been very familiar with the Old Testament passages about loving your neighbor and loving mercy and doing justice to those who are suffering. Priests and Levites were even responsible for distributing handouts to the poor in Israel. Nevertheless, both men, instead of stopping to help, intentionally cross to the other side of the path to walk by the injured man. **Why do you think they pass by?** It doesn't say, but I can think of three reasons:

- 1) **Contamination** – They might have believed the man was dead, and they knew that if they came into contact with a dead body, they would be contaminated according to the law of Moses. They would be ceremonially unclean. And as a result, they would have to return to Jerusalem for cleansing in order to become fit for service again.
- 2) **Safety** – Perhaps they did not stop because they were afraid for their own safety. Perhaps they feared that it might be a trap or the robbers might still be nearby

- 3) **Entanglement** – Or, maybe they just knew that it would be too complicated to get involved. How would they get the man to safety? Would it keep them from whatever the purpose of their journey was? Best to leave the man and hope that someone else showed up on the scene to help.

Whatever the reason was, both the priest and the Levite pass on by the wounded Israelite. But that is not the end of the story:

³³ But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. ³⁴ He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. ³⁵ The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.' ³⁶ "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" ³⁷ The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

The priest and the Levite pass by the injured Israelite, but a Samaritan stops to help. He bandages his wounds, probably tearing up his own garments to use. He uses his own wine as an antiseptic and oil as a balm and anodyne to sanitize and seal the wounds. He puts the injured man on his own donkey, even though it means walking beside him the rest of the way. He brings the man to an inn, spends the night with him to take care of him. And then he gives the innkeeper two silver coins, which would have been enough for two months' room and board, to make sure the man is taken care of until he returns.

Certainly, the lengths this Samaritan goes to for a complete stranger are impressive enough. But it becomes even more impressive when you understand who the Samaritans were. The Samaritans were hated by Israelites, and they hated the Jews in return. The Samaritans were the descendants of Israelites who had intermarried with non-Jewish people during Israel's time in exile. The Jews considered them half-breeds, religious apostates who had taken their religion and blended it with pagan practices. In fact, when the Pharisees want to insult Jesus, in **John 8:48**, they say that he is a demon-possessed Samaritan! The Jews hated the Samaritans and looked down on them. The feeling Jesus' listeners would have had as they heard a Samaritan raised up as the example of neighborly love and virtue would have perhaps been like what a patriotic American might feel were Jesus to raise up a member of the Taliban as the hero of the story.

Jesus ends the story by asking the expert in the law a question: ³⁶ *"Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"*

And the expert in the law can't even bring himself to say "The Samaritan."

³⁷ *The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."*

Jesus tells the man that loving his neighbor means loving like the Samaritan in the story: (slide) **to be willing to inconvenience yourself, risk your own safety, and bear the cost for anyone who is in need, even your enemy.**

What are the implications for justice and righteousness?

1) God's law sets an impossible standard

Remember how Luke put it? *"He wanted to justify himself, and so the expert in the law asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'"* He was hoping that the answer would be to treat your fellow Israelite with kindness. He wanted an answer that was achievable, that would let him believe that he had met God's expectations of him. And that is the tendency of each of our hearts: faced with evidence that we have fallen short, we look for ways to justify ourselves by lowering the bar or comparing ourselves to others.

But Jesus will have none of that. Instead, Jesus sets the bar so high, telling the man that loving your neighbor means to be willing to inconvenience yourself, risk your own safety, and bear the cost for anyone who is in need, even your enemy.

We are not told in this passage how the expert in the law responds. If I had to guess, I would assume that he either dismissed Jesus as crazy or resolved himself to do what Jesus had asked him to do, to try harder to love everyone in a sacrificial way.

How should he have responded? By throwing up his hands and saying, "Jesus, this is an impossible standard! How can anyone love this way? Even if I were to love one person this way, do you know how many others are suffering? I could spend every second of every day sacrificing myself for the suffering, and still hardly make a difference! Jesus, I can not meet this standard!"

And if he had only responded that way, the expert in the law would have gotten Jesus' main point, and would have received grace. Yes, the law tells us to love God perfectly, with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind. And it tells us to love our neighbor with the same intentionality and fervency that we meet our own needs. **But no one measures up to that law!** And when we confess our inability to measure up to God's law – when we stop trying to justify ourselves – we are in a position to receive God's transformative grace, a grace that will truly help us to love God and love our neighbor.

This is why it is so important to read the story in its context. If the parable of the Good Samaritan is simply a moralistic lesson about being good to people who are hard to love, we will all fail miserably or burn ourselves out trying to measure up! Or, like the expert in the law, we will find a way to justify ourselves. We will grade ourselves on a curve. We will lower the standards so that we can assure ourselves that we have met God's expectations.

Jesus holds the law up to the man like a mirror in an attempt to show him how he stands condemned under the law, how he has fallen short of the high standard of love that God has set. He tells the expert in the law to go and do likewise, to be willing to inconvenience himself, risk his own safety, and bear the cost for anyone who is in need, even his enemy.

Make no mistake, God does not grade on a curve. No, Jesus says this about loving your neighbor:

Matthew 5:43-48 - "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. ⁴⁶ If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors **doing that?** ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? ⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Do you really think that you can fulfill the law and love in the way God requires you to love? Look around you. There is no end to the needs out there. There are countless people bruised and bloodied and suffering and in need of help – and you still have more you can give and do! You still have more money, more possessions, and more time that you can give! Make no mistake – despite your best efforts, you do not measure up to God's standard of love for your neighbor.

In this passage, Jesus is being tested by an expert in the law who is seeking to prove that he has cleared God's hurdle of righteousness, and instead of patting him on the back, Jesus raises the bar to an impossible height. And you are in the same boat before God. Despite your best efforts, you can not measure up to God's standards.

The law is an impossible standard. But there is good news:

2) Jesus met the standard in His love for God and His love for you

In the Parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus in effect tells the expert in the law that loving your neighbor means to be willing to inconvenience yourself, to risk your own safety, and to bear the cost for anyone who is in need, even your enemy. This is impossible for any of us to do consistently, to the degree God requires. But there is one who did this perfectly.

You see, there is one important detail in this parable that I haven't mentioned yet. Remember that the expert in the law's original question was "Who is my neighbor?" But Jesus answers a subtly different question, which he poses at the end – "Which one was a neighbor to the man in need?" In other words, who is acting in a neighborly way? Why does this matter? Think about it. If he were answering the question, "who is my neighbor?" then the logical response would have been to make the story about a Samaritan traveling down the road who is beaten and left for dead, and a good Israelite who finds the Samaritan and cares for him. That would have been the straightforward answer. Who is my neighbor? Your neighbor is everyone, even your enemy. Got it – thanks, Jesus.

But instead, Jesus tells the story with a twist. He puts the Israelite beaten and bloodied in the road and the Samaritan on the donkey. Why does this matter? I think that if Jesus had the parable with the Samaritan in the road, it may have been instructive as a lesson about who your neighbor is, but I don't think it would have been transformative. But by telling it this way, Jesus makes the expert in the law identify not with the Samaritan, but with the Israelite bleeding in the road. And then he has someone who owes him nothing, who would have seen him as an enemy, come and show him mercy. And so, instead of being a simple moralistic lesson, the story becomes about what happens when someone who owes you nothing sacrifices himself for you as an act of mercy and grace. Again – you're not the Samaritan. You're the traveler lying in the road, beaten and bruised and close to death. And your only hope for survival is an act of grace and mercy from

someone who owes you nothing but rejection for how you have treated him. And so, the real question of the story becomes: What if you were saved by someone who owed you nothing but rejection?

This is the genius of Jesus. Instead of telling the story in a moralistic way that instructs us to love everyone, even our enemies, he tells the story in such a way where his listeners would identify with the man bleeding in the road, dying and in need of mercy. And recognizing that this is who you are has the power to transform you so that you can actually love your neighbor.

You see, we were like the man on the road, beaten by our sin and left for dead, and Jesus did not leave us to die but had mercy on us. **Jesus did not just inconvenience himself**; he left the eternal bliss of heaven to come down and suffer and die on that cross. **He was not just willing to risk his own safety**, he laid down his life, dying in our place, taking the punishment we deserved. **And he was willing to bear an enormous cost**, not just financial but the wrath of the Father on human sin, for us when we were His enemies.

***Romans 5:6-10** - You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. ⁸ But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. ⁹ Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath **through him!** ¹⁰ For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!*

You are not the good Samaritan. You are the man bleeding in the road, left for dead, in need of mercy. And you have been saved, at great cost, by one who you had offended, even though you deserved to be left for dead.

3) Now go and do justice, loving others as Jesus loved you

Now, and only now that you understand the true point of this passage, that the love God requires is a standard that none of us have met, that the consequence of our sin is that we are like that man lying in the road, close to death, but that Jesus in His mercy has saved us at great cost to Himself... **now and only now can you apply the moralistic lesson: go and love like Jesus loves**. Not in order to gain His approval, not out of guilt or fear, but because you have been loved, because you have been saved, because you have eternal life, all your heart could ever desire forever and

ever. So go and love as He has loved you. Be willing to inconvenience yourself, to risk your own safety, and bear the cost for anyone who is in need, even your enemy. And know that if you trust in Christ, your salvation does not depend on how you do with loving others, but on His perfect record.

1 John 3:16-18 - *This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. ¹⁷ If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? ¹⁸ Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.*

The expert in the law asked “who is my neighbor?” And the answer is clear: there are no limits to neighbor love. **Your neighbor is any person in need, whose need you can see, and whose need you can meet.** Even your enemy. And love is sacrificial action. It is interrupting your schedule, expending your money, risking your safety and reputation, ruining your property, even for a stranger, even for an enemy, so that you can do what is best for him.

I confess that I find this message frightening. There are so many needs. Widows, orphans, the poor, the disabled, the mentally ill. There are so many needs in my own family, in my own church, let alone in the broader world. And I am afraid to be generous. I am afraid to give. I know that I can not meet every need in my own strength. But I am sure that God’s call to love demands more than I am currently giving. And I am sure that the power and motivation lies in truly understanding the gospel of God’s grace and mercy that has saved me from death, even though I did not deserve it. And so I need to start somewhere.

For those of us who are afraid to be generous, let us close by listening to these words from Paul:

2 Corinthians 9:6-11 - *Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. ⁷ Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a **cheerful** giver. ⁸ And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. ⁹ As it is written: "He has scattered abroad his gifts to the poor; his righteousness endures forever." ¹⁰ Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. ¹¹ You will be made rich in every way*

so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.

Let us love extravagantly, as we have been loved. Who is someone that you can love this week, anonymously, seeking nothing in return?