

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.

The idea of justice is not about the individual but is all about community; what does a just society or community look like? This morning, I want to look at the Biblical vision for community and contrast it to what the visions for social justice we see around us today.

***Ephesians 2:1-22*** - *As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins,* <sup>2</sup> *in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.* <sup>3</sup> *All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.* <sup>4</sup> *But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy,* <sup>5</sup> *made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions-- it is by grace **you have been saved.*** <sup>6</sup> *And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus,* <sup>7</sup> *in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.* <sup>8</sup> *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.*** <sup>11</sup> *Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" (that done in the body by the hands of men)--* <sup>12</sup> *remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.* <sup>13</sup> *But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through **the blood of Christ.*** <sup>14</sup> *For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility,* <sup>15</sup> *by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace,* <sup>16</sup> *and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.* <sup>17</sup> *He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to **those who were near.*** <sup>18</sup> *For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.* <sup>19</sup> *Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household,* <sup>20</sup> *built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.* <sup>21</sup> *In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord.* <sup>22</sup> *And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.*

Four things we learn about the just community from this passage:

1) Every human being is spiritually dead until God makes us alive

**Ephesians 2:1-5** - *As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions-- it is by grace you have been saved.*

The vision for the just community begins here: we are united in our humanity, as image-bearers who have all fallen short of God's standard. No one has the right to look down on anyone else or consider themselves better than another human being.

Think of Paul's argument in Romans 1-3. Gentiles are sinners.

**Romans 1:18** - *The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness,*

But you Jews are also sinners.

**Romans 2:1** - *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.*

We are all in need of salvation.

**Romans 3:22-23** - *There is no difference, <sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,*

Again, every human being is spiritually dead until God makes us alive. We are all united in this predicament, all in need of grace.

2) It is only the grace of God that saves us

First, let's complete that Romans passage:

**Romans 3:22-24** - *There is no difference, <sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.*

Then look at how Paul puts it in Ephesians:

**Ephesians 2:4-5, 8-9** - *But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, <sup>5</sup> made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions-- it is by grace you have been*

saved... <sup>8</sup> 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.

No one can save themselves. No one can make themselves right with God by their intelligence or morality or good works or by the family they are born into or anything else. Salvation is an undeserved gift of God's grace that pays the debt for our sins and gives us eternal life, given to all who trust in Jesus Christ and His life, death, and resurrection for their sins. And this grace is available to everyone, every single human being born into this world.

### 3) We are saved into the family of God, where every division comes down

**Ephesians 2:13-18** - But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. <sup>14</sup> For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, <sup>15</sup> by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, <sup>16</sup> and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. <sup>17</sup> He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. <sup>18</sup> For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

Those who put their trust in Jesus are saved from sin and given eternal life. They are given the Holy Spirit and adopted into God's family. And in God's family, all the antagonism and hostility and reasons to divide must come down. It does not matter what might divide you in the world; in the family of God, you are one body, one family.

**Galatians 3:28-29** - There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. <sup>29</sup> If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

**Colossians 3:11** - Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.

What is Paul saying? In the family of God, you have people who are all sinful at birth, spiritually dead. They have received God's grace that has saved them through Jesus' death for their sins. And in God's family, they are united; anything that might divide them in the world is to come down in the church. It does not matter what gender, what ethnicity, what social status, or anything else – you are to love each other as brothers and sisters. When you become a believer in Christ, that is your primary identity. The Ethiopian woman in poverty is sister to the wealthy suburban American man.

### 4) Those who are saved do good works through the power of the Holy Spirit

**Ephesians 2:19-22** - Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, <sup>20</sup> built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. <sup>21</sup> In him the whole building is

*joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. <sup>22</sup> And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.*

***Ephesians 2:10*** - *For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*

God lives in us by His Spirit, empowering us to do the good works He has created for us to do, including loving our neighbor, doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with our God. Consider the example of Acts 2:

***Acts 2:42-47*** - *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.*

People from all nations come together in community to learn what it means to know and follow Jesus, to love each other in tangible ways and to worship Him. And their numbers grew daily. Lord, may this be so for our church! That is the Biblical vision for the just community.

- 1) Every human being is spiritually dead until God makes us alive
- 2) It is only the grace of God that saves us
- 3) We are saved into the family of God, where every division comes down
- 4) Those who are saved do good works through the power of the Holy Spirit

Now that you know the real thing, see the counterfeit for what it is. Notice that the Biblical vision is people from all different backgrounds receiving the gracious gift of God's salvation, forgiveness, empowerment by His Spirit, learning to live together and love each other to the glory of God. Everything that might divide us in the world comes down in the family of God, so that our primary identity marker is that of Christian, one who belongs to Jesus. We are Christian first, Chinese or Peruvian second. We are Christian first, male or female second. We are Christian first before we are upper, middle or lower class. And lest you think this creates some kind of us vs. them dynamic, if we truly believe that we are saved by grace and that the doors stand open to all who would trust in Christ, then we have no grounds on which to look down on any other person in this world. We have nothing in ourselves to boast about; we are saved by God's undeserved grace.

This is the Biblical view of the just community. You need to see this clearly because many of the justice movements of today emphasize what divides us instead of what unites us. Let me share my understanding of what I see in the world in the light of the Biblical view of justice. This is one of the hallmarks of justice movements driven by Critical Theory or Critical Race Theory and intersectionality. You see this spreading through education and corporate culture and politics. One of the hallmarks of this approach is dividing people into groups based on categories such as race, gender, sexuality, ability, religion, and class. One group is seen as the privileged, oppressor

group, and the other as the targeted or oppressed group. Instead of emphasizing our common humanity and striving for a world of love and justice for all, these movements emphasize what divides us. Then what do we do about this? Try to elevate those who are historically targeted or oppressed while silencing or sidelining those who have historically been members of privileged groups. Change laws and policies to encourage equity – equality of outcome – in certain areas. See everything through the lens of power and oppression.

This is a dangerous thing.

As the economist Milton Friedman wrote, *“A society that puts equality – in the sense of equality of outcome – ahead of freedom will end up with neither equality nor freedom. The use of force to achieve equality will destroy freedom, and the force, introduced for good purposes, will end up in the hands of people who use it to promote their own interests.”*

Think of the communist and socialist movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, that in the name of equality ended in mass murder and genocide and oppression. And if you have eyes to see it, look at how the way politicians and corporations and online mobs push for equality is slowly but surely destroying freedom.

The danger of emphasizing what divides us is that it just another form of tribalism – dividing people into group identities and then assigning one group undesirable traits. This has not gone well in the last century. As Thaddeus Williams put it, “We are Aryan, we are good; they are Jewish, they are bad. We are Brahman class, we are good; they are Untouchables, they are bad. We are Hutu, we are good; they are Tutsi, they are bad. We are white, we are good; they are black, they are bad. We are the Islamic State, we are good; they are infidels, they are bad.”

What is wrong with the world? Those people. The Jews. The capitalists. Black people. White people. Immigrants. Democrats. Republicans. **This is tribalism - demonize one group, and treat every member of that group as the same. This kind of community leads to hatred and war. And this is where our culture is currently headed.**

But there is a better way, and it is the way of Biblical community, where every human being is created in the image of God, and God’s saving grace is offered to all. Think of Martin Luther King Jr.’s approach to justice. This is what he wrote in his sermon “The American Dream”:

*You see, the founding fathers were really influenced by the Bible. The whole concept of the *imago dei*, as it is expressed in Latin, the ‘image of God,’ is the idea that all men have something within them that God injected. Not that they have substantial unity with God, but that every man has a capacity to have fellowship with God. And this gives him a uniqueness, it gives him worth, **it gives him dignity**. And we must never forget this as a nation: there are no gradations in the image of God. Every man from a treble white to a bass black is significant on God’s keyboard, precisely because every man is made in the image of God. One day we will learn that. We will know one day that God made us to live together as brothers and to respect the dignity and worth of every man.*

That is an example of a man who understands Biblical community, where the call is to love your neighbor and act justly towards all, to not let anyone or any group of people be discriminated against.

When justice movements point out real injustice or oppression, the church should be the first to respond. When it points out ways that we have not listened, we should listen. **But any solution that emphasizes what divides us rather than what unites us is not of God. Any solution that privileges one group of people based on ethnicity, race, gender, or anything else is not of God.** God's vision of community is one where the things that divide us come down, as we adopt our status as a follower of Christ as our primary identity marker. And following Christ means that those of us who have been privileged must love our neighbor and lift up those who truly are oppressed or discriminated against, because they are made in the image of God and worthy of dignity. If there is systemic injustice, we work against that. If our hearts harbor bias, we repent and change. And if there is someone in need, we meet that need as God leads:

***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. <sup>17</sup> 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? <sup>18</sup> Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.*

And if we have been the victim of injustice, we follow the example of Jesus by loving and forgiving and trusting God.

***Romans 12:17-21** - Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. <sup>18</sup> If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. <sup>19</sup> Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. <sup>20</sup> On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." <sup>21</sup> Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

Any solution to injustice that feeds anger and hatred is not of God. The way of God is love, grace, forgiveness, and working for justice with courage and love, not violence. Consider this story of Corrie Ten Boom:

*Betsie and I had been arrested for concealing Jews in our home during the Nazi occupation of Holland; this man had been a guard at Ravensbruck concentration camp where we were sent. Now he was in front of me, hand thrust out: "A fine message, fraulein! How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!" And I, who had spoken so glibly on forgiveness, fumbled in my pocketbook rather than take that hand. . . . "You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk," he was saying. "I was a guard in there." . . . "But since that time," he went on, "I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. Fraulein"—again the hand came out—"will you forgive me?" And I stood there—I whose sins had every day to be forgiven—and could not. Betsie had died in that place—could he erase her slow terrible death simply for the asking? It could not have been many seconds that he stood there, hand held out, but to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I ever had to do. For I had to do it—I*

*knew that . . . “If you do not forgive men their trespasses,” Jesus says, “neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses.” I knew it not only as a commandment of God, but as a daily experience. Those who were able to forgive their former enemies were able also to return to the outside world and rebuild their lives, no matter what the scars. Those who nursed their bitterness remained invalids. It was as simple and as horrible as that. And still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is not an emotion—I knew that too. Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. “Jesus, help me!” I prayed silently. “I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling.” And woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes. For a long moment we grasped each other’s hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God’s love so intensely as I did then.*

The just community comes from emphasizing our unity as humans and, in the church, as those who have received God’s grace. It will not come from emphasizing what divides us. And the just community is found in forgiveness, not bitterness and hatred.

Let me close with this powerful statement:

*Thaddeus Williams - “The fruit of the Spirit,” says Paul, “is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.” Here are some clues that we may have been taken in by an anti-Spirit ideology: Instead of being love-filled, we’re easily offended, ever suspicious, and preoccupied with our own feelings. Instead of being filled with joy, we’re filled with rage and resentment, unable to forgive. Instead of striving for peace, we’re quarrelsome—dividing people into oppressed or oppressor groups instead of appreciating the image-bearer before us. Instead of having patience, we’re quickly triggered and slow to honestly weigh our opponents’ perspectives. Instead of being kind, we’re quick to trash others, assuming the worst of their motives. Instead of showing gentleness, we use condemning rhetoric and redefined words to intimidate others into our perspective. Instead of showing self-control, we blame our issues exclusively on others and their systems, not warring daily against the evil in our own hearts.*