

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.

In our quest for justice, we will undoubtedly run up against those who we feel have committed injustices. We will meet people who do not treat people equitably, who we feel are biased or prejudiced in a way that is harming others and contributing to an unjust society. The question is, what is the best way to deal with people who we feel are acting unjustly?

Increasingly in our culture, I believe that we are seeing a specific kind of response to those who are guilty of injustice. Cancel them. Maybe you have heard the term **cancel culture**. Dictionary.com defines cancel culture this way: *"Cancel culture refers to the popular practice of withdrawing support for (cancelling) public figures and companies after they have done or said something considered objectionable or offensive. Cancel culture is generally discussed as being performed on social media in the form of group shaming."* An increasing number of people, especially those on the far left, and especially younger people, have become “offense archaeologists,” digging up things that people have said or written or done, even if it was years ago, and use it to mount a campaign against the person. It could be a racist tweet, or a costume that displayed cultural appropriation, or someone espousing views that do not align with the current sexual ethic, or just a character or institution that is out of step with the current moral beliefs. When this happens, the online mob will form, calling the person out and stirring up others to shame the person and to work to have them fired, deplatformed, erased, or in some other way blocked from having any influence.

Comedians like Dave Chapelle. Writers like J.K. Rowling. University professors like Peter Boghossian. Movies like Dumbo or Gone with the Wind. Characters like

Pepe Le Pew. Books like Dr. Seuss' If I ran the zoo. Holidays like Columbus Day. Brands like Aunt Jemima. And even historical figures like Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln.

These are all examples of people or characters or things that have had the mob come after them in recent years to get them cancelled for their views, actions, or for what they stood for.

Now, one of the results of this cancel culture has understandably been an increasing fear among all people when it comes to speaking honestly. Comedians won't do shows at colleges any more. University professors censor themselves for fear of their students coming after their jobs. Employees shut their mouths and go along with trainings that they don't agree with because they fear that if they open their mouths, they will lose their jobs. After all, if you say the wrong thing, if you don't agree with the cultural morals of the far left, you genuinely run the risk of having your life ruined by those whom you have offended. I fully expect that one day the mob will come for pastors and churches, including me.

Now, to be fair, this is not simply an issue of the far left. The church has done this as well. Pop star Amy Grant's divorce. "Farewell, Rob Bell." Even heresy hunters over this very issue of justice are calling out any pastor or writer who displays any sympathy to the world's concept of "social justice." David Platt. Matt Chandler. The church has long had a history of their own cancel culture through excommunication and shunning. How do deal with those who we feel are guilty of injustice is not just a political problem, but a human problem.

But there is a better way to confront injustice then simply feverishly looking for people to cancel and publicly shaming them until they are removed from popular culture. There is a way that does not rely on power, fear, and shame to build a better, more just world. How does the Bible teach us to confront injustice in other people?

1) Take the plank out of your own eye

Matthew 7:1-5 - "Do not judge, or you too will be judged. ² For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. ³ "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? ⁴ How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank

in your own eye? ⁵ You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.

Genius. Jesus instructed us that when we see something in another person that we consider wrong or unjust, that before we confront them, we need to take a hard look at ourselves. He uses the incredible imagery of a plank in your own eye that prevents you from seeing clearly the speck in your brother's eye, and certainly prevents you from helping them remove it without doing further damage.

According to Jesus, our own sin affects our vision like a plank in our eye, so that we do not see clearly. If we are going to confront other people, we need to begin by allowing God to point out the planks in our own eye.

Psalm 139:23-24 - *Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. ²⁴ See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting*

As we allow God to first search our hearts, we will find that there are attitudes that are not of God; sinful desires that affect our decisions; idols we are looking to for our comfort and joy, and that all of these affect how we deal with other people and must be dealt with if we are going to be calling out anyone else for their sin. What is in you? Is there a desire for vengeance? To see others suffer because of their sin? Is there a sense of superiority, that you are better than others and have the right to judge them? Is there a desire to use power to control and manipulate people? Is there a resistance to authority and a suspicion of leadership? Is there a fear of having honest conversation, because we might find out that we are wrong? If you truly let God search your heart, particularly around how you view the sins of other people, what would He reveal?

I think that if you allowed God to search your heart, you may find out that you are like the crowd in John 8

John 8:3-7 - *The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group ⁴ and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. ⁵ In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" ⁶ They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him. But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. ⁷ When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her."*

Instead of acting in judgment of another person, you may find that you have no right to throw stones, no right to cancel them. After all, as Jesus said, with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. Be careful how you judge others, for God will use that same standard to judge you. Take the plank out of your own eye first. Clean up your own side of the street first. Be willing to seek to listen and understand before rushing to judgment.

2) Speak the truth in love, with the goal of restoration

Matthew 18:15-19 - *"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. ¹⁶ But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' ¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. ¹⁸ "I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹ "Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.*

This passage is where churches have mistakenly gotten the idea of excommunication or shunning. If you listen closely, you will see that the goal in confronting another person's sin is not shunning but restoration. Jesus' instruction when you notice sin or injustice in another person is to keep it as small as possible for as long as possible. Talk in private, and then if they do not listen, bring one or two more along – a counselor, a friend, someone they respect. Notice that this doesn't leave room for gossiping or talking to other people about the problem, unless it is for the purpose of helping you address them with love. If they will not listen or repent, then treat them like an unbeliever. This does not mean shun them, for you do not shun unbelievers. It means treat them as someone who doesn't know Jesus, and love and witness to them about the gospel.

When you perceive that someone has committed injustice, the goal is not to shame and destroy them, but to achieve peace and reconciliation. Especially in the church, we are called to treat each other in the church as family, not "that jerk."

1 Timothy 5:1-2 - *Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father. Treat younger men as brothers, ² older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity.*

Galatians 6:1 - Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently.

Instead of confronting someone in anger with a desire to set them straight, we go in order to restore them gently. We go speaking the truth in love.

Ephesians 4:11-15 - It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, ¹² to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up ¹³ until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. ¹⁴ Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. ¹⁵ Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.

Speaking the truth in love causes us to grow up and mature. What does it mean to speak the truth in love? First, consider other ways that we can speak to each other:

Speaking the truth without love - Some are good at “speaking the truth”, telling people what they need to hear, but they don’t care about love. They fight, attack, and tear people down just to get their point across, but are not concerned about actually building the other person up.

Speaking in love, but without truth – Others are good at speaking “in love”, but it’s not the truth – it’s flattery, telling people what they want to hear instead of what they need to hear.

Not speaking at all – Some would rather not speak at all, but simply deny that there is a problem.

We are called to do none of these things, but rather to speak the truth in love. And in case you don’t know what love is, consider 1 Corinthians 13:4-8:

1 Corinthians 13:4-8 Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵ It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶ Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. ⁸ Love never fails.

We speak with patience, kindness, not rudely, not throwing out a record of wrongs, always protecting and hoping. We speak to serve the other person, to build them up, to spur them on towards holiness. We speak in a way they will understand and receive. And we speak the truth. Not flattery, not avoiding the problem, but saying what needs to be said, no matter what the response might be.

Why? That is what leads to maturity and unity. There is a false unity, where people don't speak the truth to each other but just smile and let people live however they please. There may be a surface unity, but no real maturity.

Where you see injustice, after you have taken the plank out of your own eye, then you can confront, speaking the truth in love with the goal of restoration.

3) Leave the vengeance to God

Romans 12:17-21 - *Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. ¹⁸ If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ 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." ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

The goal is restoration. We love and let God deal with the vengeance.

James 4:11-12 - *Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. ¹² There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you-- who are you to judge your neighbor?*

Why do we have such a hard time with this? We have a law, a code, and in our mind certain things are right and other things are wrong. Somebody has violated our sense of justice. We demand justice, punishment, accountability. And we take revenge, we refuse to forgive, because according to our standards and timetable, justice has not come in the right measure or the right timing. **The offender has not been punished or held accountable in the way I think they should and in my timetable.** They are getting away with it, so I must take revenge.

Revenge and unforgiveness is us saying, “God, I don’t like the way you are doing your job, so get out of the judgment seat.” The punishment I’ve decided is fitting is not coming, and it’s not coming in the proper timetable, so I will take things into my hand. Unforgiveness is a servant thinking he is the king. Unforgiveness is above all else about your relationship with God – at some level, you do not believe that He is a wise and good judge, and so you need to do the job for Him. And in the process, we will often justify anything, doing what they did to me and excusing it. We justify our sinful behavior with “they made me do it” or “they did it to me, so I can do it back.”

God’s wrath is his justice – he looks at injustice, rape, abuse, betrayal, and he gets angry, and he will bring justice. That is not your job. Your job is to love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you. Overcome evil with good.

1 Peter 2:20-24 - *But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. ²¹ To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. ²² "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." ²³ When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. ²⁴ He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.*

By his wounds, by his death on the cross, we have been healed. At the cross, justice and mercy meet. Above all, those social justice warriors who call out sins wherever they see them have missed the fact that they are also guilty. We all have fallen short and have offended God’s holy law and deserve His just wrath. But at the cross, Jesus took the wrath and gave us mercy. And so we can offer mercy to others and entrust God with judgment.

Romans 5:8-10 - *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!*

The “cancel culture” crowd can be cruel, arbitrary, and unforgiving in their desire for justice. Thankfully, our God is not like the crowd. We may deserve to be canceled because of our abuses, injustices, and failure to live righteously, but by

Christ's death on the cross, the law that condemns us has been canceled, and we stand redeemed, not guilty before a holy God.

Colossians 2:13-15 - When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

Thank God for His justice and His mercy, that we can trust Him to do what is right, and we can come to the cross and find mercy for those of us who deserve His judgment.