

Do Justice: Right Relationships

Isaiah 58:1-5

[INTRO]: Good morning, Cornerstone. It is great to be back with you, and to have this opportunity to gather with you today in person in this way. I want to express my gratitude to Pastor Paul and the Elders for the invitation. Originally, we had planned for me to come in the month of May while Pastor Paul was going to be away traveling. However, this global pandemic changed our plans.

It's amazing to see all that has changed in the past 5 or 6 months as we have navigated this pandemic. The impact of it on our families, our educational system, our workplaces, and so much more. Even now there is still much uncertainty and unknown about how it's all going to play out. Are schools actually going to open in a few weeks? Will there be a second wave? What exactly is going on here? I'm thankful for the perfect knowledge of God and His sovereignty over it all as we put our trust in Him.

Of course, the pandemic isn't the only thing that has been at the forefront or in the headlines recently. You simply need to turn on the news or jump onto social media to hear and see stories of injustice that are occurring around the world, south of the border and even in our own country and neighbourhoods. Videos of racial injustice. Stories of economic injustice. Professional athletes threatening to boycott games in order to demand justice. This question of justice is a bit of a hot topic these days. And rightfully so.

In my role at Prison Fellowship Canada, justice is a question that we wrestle with every single day. What does it mean to be a person of justice? What does it mean for a church to be committed to justice? What does justice look like from God's perspective?

Why do those questions even matter? **[SLIDE]** (Micah 6:8) "He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" The people of God are required by God to be people of justice, to actually act justly or to do justice. This needs to matter to us, and something that we need to wrestle with.

This morning, and Lord-willing next week, this is what we are going to attempt to do - to wrestle with the question of what it means to do justice as an individual and as a church community. Now I want to be clear, we do not have the time together to fully unpack this topic and to "do justice" to it. So what I want to do today and next week is to examine a couple of different aspects of biblical justice, and to explore with the help of God's Spirit what this means for each of our lives as we seek to become more and more like Jesus.

If you have your Bible with you or your device, I invite to turn with me to Isaiah, chapter 58 and verse 1. If you're new to the Bible, the book of Isaiah is usually right about in the middle, right before Jeremiah, and right after Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Songs of Solomon. **Isaiah 58:1**. We are going to look at the first five verses this morning.

As you're turning let me tell where we are going today as we talk about what it means to do justice. What we are going to see here is that an important part of acting justly or doing justice as followers of Jesus Christ has to do with our relationships. Biblical justice is almost always relational. It has to do with how we relate to each other and to the world around. **To be people who do justice in a biblical sense means to ensure that we are in a right relationship with God and pursuing right relationships with others.**

So hear now what God has to say to us today. **[Read Isaiah 58:1-5]** This is God's Word. Thanks be to God!

[CONTEXT]: As we dive into these verses together, it's important to note that just a couple chapters earlier, God has made clear to His people what He is looking for from them. **[SLIDE]** (Isaiah 56:1) "Thus says the Lord: Keep justice,

and do righteousness, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed.” It sounds familiar to what God says in Micah 6:8, doesn’t it?

Those two words “justice” and “righteousness” are the two words you will most often find used in the Scriptures, and they are often used together. As an example, (Psalm 33:5) “The Lord loves righteousness and justice.” In a very broad sense, when something is just or righteous, it’s the way it ought to be. It’s the way God intended.

When we look at righteousness or justice from a relational standpoint, it means that our relationships with God and with the people around us are the way they ought to be. They are right. Alec Motyer describes it this way. He says that to be righteous means to be “right with God and therefore committed to putting right all other relationships in my life.” This is what God was requiring of His people, and what He is asking of us as well as we seek to act justly or to do justice.

Looking now to Isaiah 58, the problem was that it wasn’t actually happening. God has said to keep justice and to do righteousness, but the people were failing at it. They were missing the mark. It was a bit of a gong show.

As we look at what was happening, we see that there are two dangers or pitfalls that we must avoid relationally, if we are going to be people of justice.

[SLIDE] Danger #1: DISCONNECTION - When my religious activity is not rooted in a genuine relationship with God (v.1-3a)

This is a danger that is primarily about our vertical relationship, our relationship with God. Look with me the opening verse, and notice what God is telling the prophet Isaiah to do. He says, (v.1) “Cry aloud; do not hold back; lift up your voice like a trumpet; declare to my people their transgression, to the house of Jacob their sins.”

God is announcing His judgment against the people. He is telling Isaiah to “cry aloud”, literally from the throat. God tells Him, “don’t hold back.” Don’t restrain yourself in this or try to bring relief to the people when you say it. I want you to “lift your voice like a trumpet” and “declare to my people their transgression...their sins.” God has something He wants to say at this moment. It’s a reminder to us that sometimes (or often!), the way God loves us is by speaking to us the truth that we need to hear. This is what a loving Father does for His children.

So what was the problem? What was the transgression or sins that the people were committing? (v.2) “Yet they seek me daily and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that did righteousness and did not forsake the judgement of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments; they delight to draw near to God.”

I don’t know about you, but when I read verse 2 after reading verse 1, I get a little confused. What exactly is happening here? Why is God telling the prophet Isaiah to not hold back in declaring to the people their sin? Notice what God was saying about them:

#1. *They seek me daily.*

“Seek the Lord and his strength; seek his presence continually.” (Psalm 105:4)

“You have said, “Seek my face.” My heart says to you, “Your face, Lord, do I seek.” (Psalm 27:8)

Aren’t we told to do this?

#2. *They delight to know my ways.*

“Blessed is the one who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night.” (Psalm 1:1-2).

Doesn't God promise to bless those who delight to know His ways?

#3: *They ask of me righteous judgments.*

“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and it will be open to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.” (Matthew 7:7-8)

“If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it.” (John 14:14)

Aren't these the words of Jesus?

#4: *They delight to draw near to God.*

“Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.” (James 4:8a)

As one commentator put it, [SLIDE] “One would think that people who seek God and want to understand his ways are doing the right things and have the right priorities [...] One would think that these acts of repeatedly seeking God were the devoted acts of a righteous person who loves God and keeps his commandments.”

Apparently the people were also a little confused. Notice their complaint: (v.3a) “Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?”

What is happening here? How many people are familiar with the term “ghosting a person”? It's when you have a friendship or relationship with someone and all of a sudden they just stop communicating. They don't answer your texts, they don't return your phone calls. They don't respond to you on social media. You've been ghosted.

This was the complaint of the people. In their minds, God was ghosting them. They were doing all of the right things. They were fasting, seeking God daily, delighting in his ways, calling upon him in prayer. But God wasn't responding. It was radio silence the other way.

Why was that? What was happening? Was God just having a bad day and not following through on His promises? Did He just need some introvert time to be alone? What do we do with this verse? Do we just conclude that the Bible is full of inconsistencies and therefore cannot be trusted? Or do we instead dig a little deeper?

As it turns out the problem wasn't with God, it was with them. [SLIDE] “What this verse is revealing is that people can look, act, talk and delight in the things of God, yet still not be the people of God. A good, moral, cultural Israelite knows how to act, talk and behave in religious circles, but knowing the cultural expectations of an Israelite is not the same as knowing God.”

What's the point he's making? The point is that the people were confusing their religious activity with a genuine relationship with God. They were assuming that because outwardly they were checking all the right boxes, God was obligated to pay attention to them. They were assuming that their fasting, seeking, delighting and drawing near was sufficient. They were keeping justice and doing righteousness, just like God wanted them to do. But as it turns out, all of their religious activity was falling on deaf ears because it wasn't actually rooted in a right relationship with God.

Jesus talks about this in Matthew 7. He said, [SLIDE] “On that day, many will say to me, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast our demons in your name, and do many works in your name?” Then I will declare to them, “I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.” (Matthew 7:22-23)

That's a sobering verse, because, according to Jesus, for many this is going to be the conversation. People who have done lots of great things for God but who don't actually know God. People whose religious activity has been completely disconnected from a genuine relationship with God. It's dangerous, because it has eternal consequences.

At Prison Fellowship Canada, this is one of the things we are all about. Our vision as an organization is to be part of “a national community of reconciliation and restoration to prisoners, ex-prisoners and their families using an approach to transformation based on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ.”

This is one of the main conversations we are having with prisoners and ex-prisoners. God knows everything about you. He knows everything you have ever done. And He loves you more than you realize and is ready and waiting to transform your life. But this transformation isn't just about the outward behaviours and activities. It actually begins inwardly. The starting point for true and lasting change is a reconciled and restored relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ. Don't disconnect your activities and behaviours from your relationship with God. You need to ensure that you have a genuine relationship with Jesus.

[SLIDE] “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness” (Matthew 23:27-28)

[SLIDE] (Isaiah 29:13) “This people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men.”

Here's the key to avoiding the danger of disconnection. You need to recognize that, like all of us, you have rebelled against God, and that there is nothing you can do on your own to fix that. It's not about enough religious activity to make you worthy before God. It's about what Jesus Christ has already done. It's about throwing yourself at the foot of the Cross and acknowledging your need for Him and trusting in the work of Christ on your behalf that you may be reconciled and restored into a real relationship with God.

So what does this mean for us, for you and for me? To be people who do justice means that we must ensure that we are approaching our relationship with God in the right way. The danger comes when we start to disconnect our religious activity from a genuine relationship with God. The reality is that it's possible to look, act and talk like a Christian, and not actually be in a genuine and right relationship with God. It's possible to read four chapters of the Bible daily, to pray, to gather with the church, to go to your small group or to prayer meetings, to put money in the offering plate, and to serve the hungry and destitute, but not actually know Jesus. None of those things are wrong. In fact, they are actually very good, so long as they are rooted in a genuine relationship with God.

[SLIDE] *Danger #2: COMPARTMENTALIZATION - When I my relationship with God has no impact on my relationship with others (v.3b-5)*

Look at the text with me. Notice in the second part of **verse 3** how God responds to the people. They are wondering what the problem is. They are asking why God isn't paying any attention to their religious activity that they think is so wonderful. But God says to them, (v.3b-4) “Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers. Behold you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist. Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high.”

What is happening here? What is God saying back to the people about what they are doing? Notice there are at least three things that God wants to talk to them about:

#1. “You seek your own pleasure” (business)

The NASB translates this phrase “seek your desire” and the CSB and NIV translate it as “you do as you please.” The first problem that God had with what they were doing was that they were making it all about them. It was about satisfying their own pleasures and desires. They weren't first and foremost concerned with pleasing God. Their fasting and worship was completely self-centered and self-seeking. It was all about themselves.

#2: “Oppress all your workers”

The word “oppress” can refer to exacting interest on someone, or to being a slavedriver or a taskmaster.

Nehemiah can be helpful in giving us a glimpse of what may have been happening here.

[SLIDE] (Nehemiah 5:1-5) “Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their fellow Jews. 2 Some were saying, “We and our sons and daughters are numerous; in order for us to eat and stay alive, we must get grain. 3 Others were saying, “We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our homes to get grain during the famine.” 4 Still others were saying, “We have had to borrow money to pay the king’s tax on our fields and vineyards. 5 Although we are of the same flesh and blood as our fellow Jews and though our children are as good as theirs, yet we have to subject our sons and daughters to slavery. Some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but we are powerless, because our fields and our vineyards belong to others.”

The people’s lives were marked by oppressive treatment of the powerless by those in power. Sure they were fasting and seeking God and checking all the right boxes. But they were also taking advantage of the poor by oppressing them. And this was a major problem to God.

(Proverbs 14:31) Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker, but he who is generous to the needy honors him.”

#3: “You fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist.”

Their lives were marked by violence. Not only were they oppressing their workers and the poor around them, they were treating them violently. They were beating on them.

The people were wondering why God wasn’t seeing or acknowledging their fasting and their worship. But God’s response was essentially this, “Do you want to know what I see? I see my people behaving really badly. I see hearts filled with selfishness. I see you taking advantage of the poor and the powerless. I see you physically hurting them. And it’s insulting to me.”

Notice in verse 5 what God has to say about this - (v.5) **Is such the fast that I choose, a day for a person to humble himself? Is it to bow down his head like a reed, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Will you call this a fast, and day acceptable to the Lord?”** God’s not buying what they’re selling. This is not what He’s looking for from them.

Here’s the point God is making in these verses. We must not fall into the dangerous trap of compartmentalizing our relationship with God. Our relationships with others impacts our relationship with God. When things are out of sorts on a horizontal level, it affects our relationship with God on a vertical level. Our worship on Sunday ought to affect our work on Monday.

Have you noticed this? Have you noticed that when you’ve had a fight with your spouse on the way to church it seems a little harder to engage in worship? Have you noticed that when you’ve lost your cool with a friend or with one of your kids, it seems a little harder to connect with God in prayer? Your morning devotions seem a little flat. Sometimes that’s because what God actually wants you to do in that moment is go repent and be reconciled to that individual before you start connecting with Him.

This is why Jesus said,

[SLIDE] (Matthew 5:23-24) “So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.”

If we want to be people who do justice, then we must ensure that our relationships with others on a horizontal level are in a right place. Paul wrote in (Romans 12:18) “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.” Do your part to ensure that you are living peaceably with all.

At Prison Fellowship Canada, one of our core programs is in the area of restorative justice. The focus of this area of our work is essentially what we are talking about here. It's helping prisoners understand the impact that their crime has had on their relationships - not just their relationship with God, but also their relationship with the victim, their family and the community. And it's about walking with a prisoner to help them begin to start taking responsibility and taking steps wherever possible to seek reconciliation and restoration with those who have been impacted by it. It's powerful stuff!

So what does this mean for you and for me? You see, how we treat our spouse, our children, our friends, our neighbours, our co-workers, our employees, the young lady who checks us out at the grocery store, that super opinionated guy on Facebook - these interactions, these relationships all matter to God. It's a facet of what it means to be people who pursue justice. I want to challenge us this morning to take a serious look at the relationships in our lives. To be people who are committed to doing justice means being people who seek right relationships not just with God but also with those around us. It's not either/or, but rather both/and. We must be careful not to compartmentalize our relationship with God from our relationships with us.

[CONCLUSION]: So as we close this morning, I want to invite you to take some time for prayerful reflection. To be people who do justice means to be those who are right with God and are pursuing right relationships in all areas of our lives.

So the first question to ask is: Have I fallen into the dangerous trap of disconnection? Have I become consumed with religious activity that is not rooted first and foremost in a genuine relationship with Jesus Christ? Have I become more concerned with checking the boxes on sound doctrine and spiritual disciplines than with truly seeking and knowing God in an intimate way? If that is the case, then the path of repentance is simply to turn back again to God and pursue renewed affection for Him.

The second question to ask this morning is: Have I fallen into the danger trap of compartmentalization? Has my so-called vertical relationship with God failed to impact my relationships with others on a horizontal level? Am I doing my part to pursue reconciliation, restoration and peace in this way? Who specifically do I need to reach out to on this? This is all part of what it means to be people of justice.

[SLIDE] (Isaiah 66:2b) "But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word." May this be the people that we are today as we pursue justice in this world.

[Close in prayer]