

Doing Justice

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Amos 5:14-24

Sermons Series:
Best Spiritual
Practices

*God created
me in His
image. So, I
returned the
favor and
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in my image*

There was a time in my Christian life when I imagined God existed primarily for my benefit. If God would do what I wanted, I'd trust Him more. If God came through for me, I'd give Him more of my life. If God made my life enjoyable and pain-free, I'd believe in Him passionately. But anytime God didn't meet my expectations, we had a problem. Like I said, God existed for me, not I for Him. God created me in His image. So, I returned the favor and created God in my image.

I expected God to love me, but I was resistant to the idea that God would judge me and hold me accountable. Judgment carries a negative connotation for people in this excessively tolerant age. We want, in the words of Mark Labberton, a Sponge Bob god who wants us to feel good about our lives no matter what we are like. Sponge Bob god never pushes back or makes demands on us.

We often say that God is love. Indeed, God is love, but God is also just. God is both loving and just simultaneously.

N. T. Wright writes in his book, *Surprised by Love*, that God's coming judgment is

actually good news for people. God's judgment is something to be longed for and celebrated. In a world of systematic injustice, bullying and oppression, the thought that there will come a day when evil people are put in their place and good people exonerated is the best news there can be.

The book, *Schindler's List*, which inspired a movie by the same name, tells the true story of Nazi guards during World War II who rounded up Jews in Krakow, Poland to ship to a nearby concentration camp. Oscar Schindler, the hero of the story, witnesses a mother and son brutally murdered by the guards. It was most revolting to Schindler that this atrocity was committed in full view of a three-year-old little girl, who stood out in her red dress. The author writes, "Later in the day after he had absorbed a ration of brandy, Oscar understood the proposition in the clearest terms: the Nazis permitted witnesses, such witnesses as the red-dressed toddler, because they believed all the witnesses would perish too." The Nazi guards did what they wanted because they thought they would never have to account for their actions. There would

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be no day of reckoning, no judgment and no accounting of what they had done.

Thankfully, the Bible reassures us evil will be punished. Ultimately, there will be justice. The Bible is very clear about this fact. We're held accountable for what we do. No one relishes the thought of a coming judgment, but, then, the alternatives are worse. None of us wants to live in a world where nothing matters.

The Scripture passage read a few moments ago is rather jarring. God speaks about his people in the strongest possible words: "I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies" (5:21). God stamps His disapproval on their religious worship by branding them as *your* feasts...*your* assemblies...*your* songs...*your* harps. Their melodious singing, in verse 23, is just noise in the ears of God. God continues with His holy rant, "Even though you offer me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them" (5:22), or literally, "I do not like the smell of them." When you add it to the phrases that follow it, "I will not look" in verse 22 and "I will not listen" in verse 23, what God is really saying is that I do not like the smell, the sight or the sound of your worship.

Is God having a bad day? After all, these are devout people. They gather each Sabbath for worship. They celebrate the major religious

festivals. They give the obligatory offerings. They even present beautiful music to the Lord.

But apparently their worship is mainly for show. We read earlier in the chapter "...they trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain" (5:11). They charge exorbitant taxes and take bribes (5:12). When the poor seek justice in the courts, they are pushed aside at the city gates (5:12). If the city fathers are corrupt, what redress is available to the poor?

In chapter 8, we're told their system of commerce is also corrupt. They can't wait for the Sabbath to be over, so the people of God can resume their devious ways. Their merchants use dishonest scales. Their judges take bribes. Their politicians demand favors. Their prophets tell fortunes for money. The whole business stinks to high heaven. That's why God will dismiss their worship as mere window dressing, because they show no regard for justice.

God wants His people to create just societies. God wants justice in the courts. Listen up, judges and lawyers, plaintiffs and defendants. God wants His people to "maintain justice in the courts" (5:15). Listen up, business leaders and bankers. God wants justice in the marketplace. Woe to those who take bribes, charge exorbitant rates of interest and impose

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heavy taxation. God wants justice for the poor.

When we think of the poor, charity comes to mind. When God considers the poor, justice is in the heart of God.

God wants “justice to roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (5:24). Every time I read these words, Martin Luther King’s 1963 “I have a dream” speech explodes in my head.

Amos labors as a shepherd in the arid regions of Israel (Amos 1:1). Amos must lead his sheep to reliable sources of water. Seasonal rains create temporary wadis, but Amos must seek ever-flowing streams. Justice isn’t meant to be intermittent. Like an ever-flowing stream, justice must be counted on every day of the year.

God is both loving and just simultaneously. God holds forth hope for those who practice justice in verse 14: “Seek good, not evil, that you may live.” The same thought is expressed in verse 15, “Hate evil, love good; establish justice in the courts.” Perhaps the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.” Justice doesn’t preclude mercy. Indeed, it makes mercy possible.

Justice is getting what people deserve. Mercy is giving people more than they deserve. Mercy is giving people a break. Sometimes mercy and justice seem to oppose each other, as though justice is harsh and

mercy is soft. Actually, they complement each other. Justice without mercy would be tyranny. Mercy without justice would be weakness.

As parents, Chris and I struggled to walk the fine line between justice and mercy. We sought to enforce the rules, but we also recognized the need for mercy. It’s challenging to balance the competing desires of justice and mercy.

G. K. Chesterton wrote, “Christianity got over the difficulty of combining furious opposites by keeping them both and keeping both of them furious.” Justice and mercy could be called “furious opposites.” They are held together in Scripture in creative tension. If God is only just, there would be no room for mercy. If God is strictly merciful, there would be no justice in the world.

If truth be told, we want justice for everybody else and mercy for us. We would be satisfied if everybody else received his just deserts, so long as God shows us mercy.

Where does this passage speak in your life today?

If you are not a Christian, I invite you to consider entering into relationship with this God of justice and mercy. God holds us responsible for our actions, but God also extends mercy to us. Rejoice, my friends that God is not only just, but merciful, as well. God’s mercy is made available through Jesus Christ. We cannot buy or earn

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***And what
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our way into God's favor. We are justified or made right with God by the salvation offered through Jesus Christ. We are made right with God so that we can do right by God. Have you received God's gift of mercy?

If you are a Christian, God's call to justice has both a personal and social application. R. C. Sproul writes, "Social ethics must never be substituted for personal ethics. Crusading can easily become a dodge for facing up to one's lack of personal morality. By the same token, even if I am a model of personal righteousness, that does not excuse my participation in social evil. The man who is faithful to his wife while exercising bigotry toward his neighbor is no better than the adulterer who crusades for social justice. What God requires is justice both personal and social."

***To do justice
and to love
mercy.***

Conservative commentator Glenn Beck warns his listeners to be on the lookout for any churches that preach "social justice." If you find the words social justice on a church web site, run as fast as you can away from that church. He claims "social justice" is a code word for socialism and communism.

But justice in the Bible *is* inescapably social. Biblical justice has primarily to do with the rights of other people. You won't find a dichotomy in Scripture between personal ethics and social justice. The God who saves people is also the One who redeems society.

Brian McLaren illustrates how justice and mercy function together as furious opposites. "One day I stood by the edge of a raging river. Barely audible over the roar of the water I heard a faint cry for help. Looking up, I saw someone in the water, rushing by me. With just enough time to act, I grabbed a tree branch, leaned out over the wall and grabbed the person by the wrist as he went under. Another bystander happened along and helped me pull the victim from the frigid water. Just as we did, we heard another faint cry for help. Someone else was bobbing in the rough water coming towards us. Working together, my new friend and I pulled the hapless person from the torrent. As we did, we heard another cry for help. This went on for hours. There were many of us now, pulling people from the water as fast as we could."

"Pulling people from the water was an act of mercy. It's critical work; it saves lives. However, it did not become a quest for justice until a number of us left our spot on the shore and went upstream to see who was throwing them in."

The words of the prophet Micah come to mind: "He has shown you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To do justice and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (6:8). Do justice and love mercy.

