

## “Justice”

Amos 5:14-15; Exodus 23:1-9;  
Acts 17:22-31; Matthew 23:23-28

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Jesus told them that they were struggling to do a lot of particular things. They had the laws that they were following—the simple things like tithing. The weightier matters of the law—justice, mercy, trust—they were missing those.

In our series, we have already talked about two of those. We have talked about mercy as compassion and how important that is to what God calls us to be and who we are and how we live our lives. And we talked about truth-telling or truthfulness, being faithful and being worthy of trust. The Good News Bible translates it as honesty because it shows that if we are honest then we develop trustworthiness. But we haven't talked about justice.

What is justice? The first thing that came to my mind was what it might look like in our society. If I went to a movie such as “The Justice League,” what sense of justice would I get from it? Somehow saving earth from aliens is not quite it. We need meta humans to somehow help us survive. That's a weird way of looking at justice in my mind. But what is justice?

I could spend time talking about how scientists believe that fairness is something that's just part of the way our minds are structured. But again, I don't think that's really where we start as people of faith. It feels to me we start with the very thing Jesus is telling us, that the weightier matters of the law include justice and mercy and trust. So what is justice?

In Matthew, there are three times where justice is talked about as justice. One is the one we just read. The other two are quotations out of the Old Testament. So perhaps the idea of justice comes out of that Old Testament view of what justice is. There's a particular word that is “justice” in the Old Testament. It is *mishpat*. *Mishpat*, if you really look back at it, it is a word that describes a tribe and how they are shaped by the god they follow. So the character of their god becomes the character of the people. That's the *mishpat* of the people—the character of the god that they follow and how it shows up in their lives as the character of a people. It's about relationships. It's about the nature of being a people of God.

Sometimes the word is translated as “judgment” because when you become a people who are created by or shaped by a god who has a particular way for you and you have a problem in your midst, the judgment you make is based on the way of your god. So you try to make those judgments, solve your disputes, based on what your god cares about.

In the time of the Judges the way disputes were dealt with was that the two people having the dispute would go to the gate of the town and they would gather the elders of

the town and invite them to hear their dispute. Then the elders would try to guide them to a solution that fit according to the people they are, which is the people who are formed by a god, who are shaped by that god's way. So the Hebrews were shaped by Yahweh, by the way of our God, and they would try to shape their decisions based on that. That suggests that we might look at the character of that *mishpat*, of that way, the way of God.

I'm going to do something I don't generally do, but I think it's helpful in this case. I'm going to run through some scriptures that talk about the way *mishpat* (justice) is talked about in the Old Testament.

In Micah 7:8, there's this sense of not taking bribes and not letting the rich dictate their desires, for that's a perversion of *mishpat*, a perversion of justice.

In Jeremiah 22, it talks about helping someone who has been robbed recover from that. Then it talks about wrong or violence to the alien, to the orphan, to the widow, or shedding the blood of innocents.

In Amos: hate what evil, love what is right. See that justice prevails in the courts. When you gather to do those decisions, those judgments, make sure that the *mishpat* is there, that the way of God is the way that you carry that out. Give justice to the weak and the orphan. Maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy. Deliver them from the hand of the wicked. It's all about giving them justice. It's about the *mishpat* of God, the way of God.

And then the passage we read from Exodus: Giving false testimony perverts justice, the *mishpat* of God.

So if we think about what *mishpat* is as we look through scripture, it's the way we get along and solve our disputes characterized by impartial arbitration, equitable treatment, compassionate help, and adherence to the will of God. The idea is that if we look at these different ways that justice is talked about, there is a sense that disputes are taken care of in a fair way, in a way that is impartial, that doesn't give somebody more weight when they come in just because they are rich or have a higher status, or because they're poor and have a lower status. Instead, we try to hear the story and how it can be solved so that we can get along as a community of God, of faith.

There's equitable treatment. Again, the idea here is that not only in the courts, but in all of life there should be a sense that we all have an opportunity. Sometimes we talk about justice in terms of equal opportunity. It's not having everything the same, but that everybody has the chance to live the life they are called to live as a human being. So there's this sense of equitable treatment.

But if we look at those passages, it really goes beyond just equitable treatment because it focuses often on the poor, the needy, the widow, the foreigner, anybody who is vulnerable in society, and inviting us to make sure that they are helped. So there's

this idea of compassionate help that is also part of the *mishpat* of God, the justice of God. As those are described to us, they describe the way we get along with one another.

Sometimes when people talk about justice or *mishpat*, they are talking about the way we govern our lives. We have to come up with some way of getting along with each other, of figuring out the troubles and disputes we have with one another. It also invites us to not only think about the disputes we have, but how can we do better than we've been doing. What's a better way to get along together? How do we make sure that we're living into the will of God, which in the Old Testament probably is described as shalom? How do we live into that shalom that God wants? We have to learn to get along or govern our relationships with one another. I'm afraid we can't get away from some kind of governance. Sometimes we talk about government as if it's the problem. Well, we're always going to have some kind of government. Government is not the problem. It's whether it's bad government or good government. It's how we do it. God invites us to think about and try to figure out how we live together. How do we live together?

If you take scripture as evidence, I would suggest that it sounds like justice is pretty central. Psalm 98, verse 14 suggests righteousness and justice are the foundation on which God builds the kingdom, our lives, the world we live in. The verse also suggests it would be characterized by love and faithfulness, or love and trustworthiness.

Let me just note oftentimes justice and righteousness come together. Righteousness in Hebrew is *tzadik*. If you think of justice as the milieu in which we live and try to do God's will in getting along and trying to solve disputes, righteousness is the daily living out of God's will in our own lives. So it's both. It's how we live together in justice and how we try to solve the problems of living in community. And, it's how we find our way forward together and find the joy that God invites us to know. We do that through recognizing together what God has suggested and we also try to live it out in our daily living. That's righteousness. How do we end up having right relationships with God and one another? God invites us to work on that.

Just to note, it just comes up over and over again. What does God like? In Jeremiah, it says, "I am the Lord. I act with steadfast love, justice and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight." says the Lord."

I think in many ways, scripture over and over again suggests that if we want to delight the Lord, we live in steadfast love, righteousness, and justice, continually choosing to care for each other, and that our agreed on love of God is depicted in our relationships with one another. We work out daily the ways of God in our own lives. We're called to work at ways to solve our disputes impartially, so that everyone gets equal treatment, that nobody gains the advantage, that the scales aren't tipped already for one person over another, one status over another. We're to help with a deep compassion for one another.

Eugene Peterson suggests that “a faith that doesn’t serve justice could end up making us worse instead of better. It can actually separate us from God and his ways instead of drawing us to him.”

Jesus is telling us that the scribes and Pharisees, the teachers of the law, are going after some kind of carrot. They are going after something for themselves while making themselves look good on the outside, but they are not really going after the weightier matters of the law. It’s not justice. It’s not mercy. It’s not honesty.

In the book we looked at this summer, “The Spiritual Disciplines Handbook,” Adele Calhoun writes, “Unfortunately justice is not something we can take for granted among Christians. We, like the world around us, like our comforts and balk at sacrifice or inconvenience. While we endorse the notion of justice, our time and energy goes into personal development and material accomplishments.”

This has always been a struggle for me because justice does feel so central to what God wants. It’s part of the weightier matters of the law. But how does a concern for justice fit into my life? How does the concern for justice fit into our lives, into our thoughts, into our actions? Can we look at what we care about and see how it fits with God’s *mishpat*, God’s justice, what God cares about? Jesus reminds us that central to that is the love of God and the love of neighbor and self. How do others recognize that love in our lives?

It is a continuing struggle for me to figure out how we live out the will of God, show God’s grace, care for our community, care for one another, care about oppression and the way we show inequities, the way we stereotype, the way we hold onto privilege. There are all kinds of things that are gathered up in this. One of the things that we’re trying is these Vital Community Conversations that allow us to at least bring up some of these hard conversations and to think about them. One of the easy things with justice is to not pay attention to it, and not even realize what the struggles of our world are. And yet, we live in a world that is full of struggles, full of a need for Christians who will live just lives, who will show God’s grace and live out God’s *mishpat*, God’s justice.

So we are invited to look at the way we live in our actions, in our social life, in the way we govern ourselves, and see if we are enacting justice. For Jesus says, “The weightier matters of the law are justice, mercy, and honesty.” Amen.