

How Then Shall We Live? : The Just Shall Live
By Jason Huff
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Ezekiel 33:11-20, Luke 11:37-42, 1 John 3:7-11

Today's final Scripture reading comes from 1 John 3:7-11. Listen now to God's Word. "Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. He who does what is right is righteous, just as He is righteous. He who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work. No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God. This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother. This is the message you heard from the beginning: we should love one another."

I've never been in a courtroom. The closest I've gotten to participating in a trial is watching The People's Court. A few of you here have worked in the judicial system either as police officers or lawyers, but most of us don't have that experience. But in my mind – and I think in most minds – that's what justice is about. Going before a judge, a trial by a jury of our peers, establishing guilt and innocence, evidence beyond a reasonable doubt, punishment that fits the crime – those are the essence of American justice.

But if you've ever poked your head around a courthouse, you'll notice that what we see on TV rarely reflects reality. Instead of being gigantic rooms with tons of seats, some courts are virtual broom closets. Many cases don't go before a jury. A lot of what happens in our justice system doesn't occur in the courtroom at all. I genuinely appreciate our legal system despite its flaws, but it's easy to misunderstand how it all works, especially if you're not a part of it.

In the same way, we have pictures of biblical justice that are different from what the Bible actually lays out for us. I've never found anyone who's read the Bible straight through that hasn't gotten bogged down in the legal code of Israel found in the books of Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Because of that, we sometimes get confused. My prayer is that when we leave here today, we'll have a better understanding of biblical justice and how we can live just lives today.

Jesus confirmed that the greatest of the biblical commands were found in the first five books of the Old Testament. The two great commands are to love God with your heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself. Those two statements sum up the whole of the Old Testament law. When you look at the details of that legal system, it becomes apparent that the law requires members of the Israelite community to act justly with one another.

So many special provisions exist in God's law for taking care of the weak and poor in Israelite society that it's impossible in a short setting to talk about them all, but we can sum them up. First, there's respect for the alien and the stranger. The law calls for God's people to be hospitable to a fault to those who aren't Hebrews. In other ancient near-Eastern societies, the foreigner was lucky to have second-class status; rarely did another ancient legal code guarantee protections for non-citizens or people outside the racial-ethnic majority. But in Israel, the outsider had rights. The Law commanded Israelite farmers to leave behind for the widows and foreigners anything that wasn't harvested the first time around. In Leviticus 19:33-34, God says, "When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt."

Second, the Old Testament law protects the dignity of human life against oppression. Sometimes we get nervous because we read about things like slavery in the Old Testament, but it's not what we think. An Israelite could sell himself into slavery to another Israelite, but the payment for services had to be made up front. This slavery was like indentured servitude, not the forced brutal labor of American slavery. This servitude could not last over seven years without the explicit consent of the servant. There were certain tasks a servant could not be asked to do. Servants could earn their own money and do their own business, and many in ancient Israel became servants as a road to wealth. These provisions didn't exist in most other cultures.

But there are more than just protections for slaves. Even if someone owed you a debt, you couldn't take anything from them that threatened their health or livelihood as a pledge. If you bought inherited property from someone, it would revert to their family during the Year of Jubilee, which was to be celebrated once every 50 years. The law stressed that no one was to take advantage of another with dishonest weights and measures or holding back someone's pay. The law required a 10% tithe every three years that was collected to take care of the indigent and widowed. The law gave dignity to even the poorest in society.

God is clear that justice is not a one-and-done thing but is the ongoing practice of His people. In our passage from Ezekiel this morning, the Israelites say it's unfair of God to condemn the righteous who turn from justice and for God to redeem oppressors who repent. But God's justice requires us to stay in right relationship with Himself and with others. And the Israelites weren't so keen on that.

They wanted God to be confined to the Law He had given them, rather than for God to be the Lord of everything they did. So they found ways around the law. They made up their own laws – like washing their hands before a meal, which Jesus in today's passage didn't obey. Meanwhile, they found loopholes so they could oppress others without technically breaking the law. And this was among the religious elite! Jesus said in this morning's second passage that they "devoured widow's houses." In another passage, Jesus showed that the scribes had come up with a way to declare their property "devoted to God" so that they wouldn't have to use it to support their aging parents. They used their supposed piety to support their ungodly ways. As Jesus said, they gave a tenth of everything even down to the herbs in their kitchens, but neglected true justice.

Our passage from 1 John hits the proverbial nail on the head, and here's what it says: "This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother." The word translated "right" in the passage is the word *diakaiosune* in Greek, and it's the exact same word that means "just." Justice and righteousness are the same term. In other words, the way we can tell if someone truly belongs to God or not is whether or not they practice justice in their affairs. Justice is indelibly linked with treating someone else the way we want to be treated.

With that background, what's biblical justice look like today? What does it mean for us to practice justice knowing that we are forgiven and redeemed by Jesus Christ? The simplest rule still applies – "treat others as you would be treated." That's a teaching that makes Christianity unique because all the other major world religions have a statement just like it, but in the negative – in other words, "don't treat others the way you wouldn't want to be treated." Jesus' word is incredibly important because it stresses the need for action. It's not just avoiding oppression; it's relieving it as much as possible through our deeds. So what does that look like?

This is really, really tough. Biblical justice is never simplistic but always centered around supporting godly thought and action. Let me flesh that out a little bit. The Pharisees made up a ton of laws – you'd think they would be hard to remember, right? But they were convinced that following the letter of the Law made them righteous. Obeying the letter of the Law was actually a whole lot easier than discerning its intention, in discerning real righteousness. Jesus condemned the Pharisees for missing the forest for the trees, for making justice simple rather than situational.

While I was in the middle of working on my sermon this week, our evening Bible study group met for dinner, and we got to really discussing this topic. And what we started to piece together just a little bit was that platitudes and simple solutions don't really work. For example, we tend to favor small businesses against corporations. None of us likes it when a WalMart comes into town and runs out all the family-owned shops that have been there for years. But a few of us who had lived in those small towns knew that huge chain stores were only part of the issue. Sometimes it had to do with small businesses not doing right by their customers because they were the only game in town. The more we talked, the more the pat answers fell down.

What I realized as I participated was this: any business and any union, no matter how large or how small, has the potential to be just or unjust. A business can serve the community and treat people fairly and make a modest profit, or it can play with prices and drive others out and then gouge their customers. A union can ask for reasonable wages and fair packages or it can run off with everything it can possibly get. Issues like size aren't the only thing involved.

Neither is previous virtue a guarantee. God's Word taught us this morning that the just can become unjust and the oppressor can change his ways. Recently I started researching the companies that are a part of my mutual funds for retirement and what they support. In some cases I was shocked. Some good and trusted names lend their support to causes that stand against Christianity and Christ's principles. My point this morning is not to tell you what stocks to buy and what stores to shop – remember, no easy answers. But every Christian has the Spirit of God as their counselor, and with His guidance, you can make just decisions.

Often – and this is true for me too -- we ignore the justice issues behind what we buy. It's easier to assume that companies are on the up-and-up rather than to investigate. It's easier to purchase whatever we do without giving it any thought. I want to encourage us to make our decisions not just with our wallets but also our hearts and minds and Spirit-led consciences. We may not know how Joe who runs the local bakery spends his money, and that's OK. God commands us not to be busybodies who know everything about everybody's business. But we should take care to know the businesses where we spend a significant amount of our money or that we own a part of through our investments. We can't change every negative practice, but we can use our money to support those things that we think would honor God.

Another thought on biblical justice: it's not about radical redistribution of wealth but absolute fairness and overwhelming compassion. In Acts 2, we see the beginning of the church, and everything is wonderful for a while. The believers held everything in common; any time anybody had a need, they shared; from time to time, people sold property and gave it to the disciples so that the whole church could prosper. It was awesome. But by the time Paul wrote his letters, he took up contributions for the church in Jerusalem. Apparently, the redistribution of wealth eventually caused the believers in Jerusalem to fall into poverty. A lot of them stopped working because they expected Jesus to return right away, and many of them didn't handle their money very well. The church was called to be extravagantly generous, but never again do we see communalism on a big scale. It simply didn't work.

Jesus told us that the poor would always be with us. Poverty is an unfortunate side effect of fallen human nature and the way we treat each other. As I experienced in my year in Russia, our economic system here in America leads to unequal happiness and small pockets of poverty, but a godless system of forced redistribution leads to equal misery. Our job as biblical Christians is not to make sure everybody gets the exact same piece of the pie; it is our job, however, to be scrupulously fair in all of our business transactions and filled with mercy for those who don't have enough – mercy that translates into financial generosity.

As Christians, how can we put that mercy into action? It's up to you. I'll make a few suggestions – not commands, but practical ways it might work for you. When you can, buy as direct as you can. If you like coffee, consider buying fair trade that comes from the growers themselves. Check out local farmers' markets. And don't make it a habit to haggle – pay what their work is worth. When you tip at a restaurant, don't be stingy but generous...and if the service is bad, don't ding them for it. We all have bad days, but our jobs may not require us to put on a friendly face ten hours a day. When you give to a food pantry, don't give the stuff off your shelf that's past date; buy the good stuff you'd want to eat and give it. Instead of giving to a faceless charity, get involved with something like Compassion International or World Vision where you get the chance to make a connection with another human being. As much as you can, show your generosity one on one. There's a reason for that, and it's not to toot your own horn. Jesus warned the Pharisees against that. Instead, remember that as Christians, we are called to build relationships for God's Kingdom. A great way to build relationships is to get to know people in the marketplace and show God's extravagant generosity to them.

Another element of biblical justice: love the stranger in your midst. If ancient Israelites cared for the immigrant in their midst and treated him with honor and respect, then this should be even more true for us who are Christians. This isn't an immigration issue – it's not a bad thing for us to discuss the fairness of the law, but that's not what this is about. What God tells us is stop playing favorites. One of the first things I heard when I came to Metro Detroit was how the Chaldeans lived here and the Muslims lived there and the Polish lived there. We live in a huge ethnic melting pot in this city...but the problem is, we don't melt. Some of us hold to ancient prejudices. Sometimes we do hold people down because they come from a certain place.

But God's call is to show justice to everyone we meet. Fairness, compassion – they aren't exclusively for people that look or act or talk like us. We've talked about evangelism in the past, God's command for us to share the good news of Jesus' love and forgiveness with others. One of the difficulties we have with evangelism is that we are reaching out to someone different, someone not like us, someone who does not yet know God. Because of that, they probably act differently, maybe even in ways that occasionally offend us. It's easy to stay in our church cliques and just hang around with the people we've known for years. But this is a form of biblical injustice – because those we should have the most compassion on are those who are living without the knowledge and love of Jesus Christ in their lives. So I encourage you, be a friend to the person you don't know who might be a little different from you – and make certain that you show them the same love you show yourself or your best friend.

One last thought: pray for biblical justice to be done. There are tons of injustices in our world. When I read that there are more slaves in the world today than at any point in history, most in the sex trade...when I hear about those who die because their governments let the food sent to them rot as a means of control...when we see gross violations of the rights of Christians in places like China because we as a nation are financially beholden to them...it's enough to overwhelm you. We might feel called to send money or support a missionary or something, but in many of those situations, there's no earthly thing you can do.

The one thing you can do outranks them all – pray. When our hearts are burdened and we pray for those suffering from injustice, God responds. In Luke 18:7-8, Jesus says, “Will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly.” If we are weighed down with concern for those who suffer and are oppressed, that's not a bad thing – if we are willing to take those concerns to our LORD, who is called the just judge who will judge all the nations in fairness. Only in eternity will you know what justice your prayers brought about...but they will be seen as a sign of your desire to be a child of God who does what is right and just.

Biblical justice is not just a subject for theologians to argue. It's something we can practice right here and now. I encourage you to pray, and then to think about how and where you spend your time and money. Because if we are the people of God, showing merciful justice to those around us is a great way we can show that we are His children.