

**The Heart of God//Jesus and the Justice of God
Part One – Introduction**

**September 8, 2024
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Luke 4:12-30

“He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.” – Micah 6:8

Simply the mention of “justice” in our day and age, especially if we add on the modifier “*social*” to justice – can elicit a wide range of responses – including anger, skepticism, and a deep sense of division.

“The term social justice has become politicized, criticized, and often used with a variety of meanings and for a variety of causes.” – eds. Cynthia Westfall and Brian Dyer, *The Bible and Social Justice: Old Testament and New Testament Foundations for the Church’s Urgent Call*

Our goal in this series will be to dive into the questions like: What does *God* mean by justice? How does the whole story of Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation, paint a picture of the good, the true, and the beautiful? And what will it mean to “do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God”?

I. Apprentices to Jesus

The mission statement of Summit Drive Church: “We exist to glorify God by developing caring, passionate followers of Jesus Christ.”

We are “apprenticing ourselves” to the way of Jesus.

Our Mission Flows from Jesus’ Mission

What did Jesus think he was doing? Like, his own mission, his purpose in life? The most explicit description Jesus gives us of his mission comes from his first recorded sermon in Luke’s Gospel – a message delivered in his hometown synagogue. This has sometimes been called “the Nazareth manifesto” found in Luke 4:14-30

Luke 4:18-21

¹⁸ “The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,

¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

²⁰ Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. ²¹ He began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

II. God's Heart for His World Is Being Fulfilled in Jesus

"Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

How does he "explain" this prophetic text? By pointing to himself. "God's dream for the world is being made reality in what I am now doing."

The cross and Jesus' subsequent resurrection – that is the climax of Jesus' ministry. But without looking at his life, we'll miss the *meaning* of that climactic element – miss the "why" of the cross altogether.

What Jesus is doing nothing short of bringing about a whole new creation – and a whole new way of living in the world. He is coming to repair the rip that sin and injustice have caused in the world and make us the sort of people who live according to his new way of life. One that seeks reconciliation. One that holds out hope for love to reunite people. He is enacting, at the end of the day, God's peace – God's *shalom*.

This will only be finally accomplished at his return. But we are called to enact what the Gospel means in the here and now. As Jesus teaches us to pray: "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." And that begins now.

Jesus "Fills-Full" God's Plan to Renew God's Peace – God's Wholeness

If we want to know what God is like. If we want to know what God wants for us, and from us, we will see that most clearly when we look at Jesus himself; how he lived; what he taught; how he treated the people around him.

God's justice is most perfectly defined in Jesus' own life, teaching, and ministry.

III. "Proclaim Good News to the Poor"

Jesus' Ministry addresses the *spiritual and physical*

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor." – Luke 4:18, quoting Isaiah 61:1

"...to proclaim good news to the poor...proclaim freedom for the prisoners...proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."

Mighty Words: That language of "proclaim" is repeated three times. Jesus has "mighty words" that announce that God's reign has now come to earth.

Mighty Actions: "...recovery of sight to the blind, to set the oppressed free..."

This would be true of both spiritual blindness, and physical blindness. It would be setting people from the spiritual oppression of the evil one and inaugurating a way of life that recognizes the full humanity of every person and overturns oppressive systems in the social and political realm.

The scope of Jesus' ministry is spiritual and physical. It encompasses the whole of the created order.

Who are the poor?

"...proclaiming good news **to the poor.**" What does that mean? Why are the *poor* mentioned in particular?

Jesus is carrying forward what has been taught in the Old Testament, and here we find that the Lord speaks of himself in terms of justice.

The prophet Zechariah writes:

"This is what the Lord Almighty said: 'Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner, or the poor. Do not plot evil against one another.'" – Zechariah 7:9-10

While it is true that there is a kind of "spiritual poverty," a knowledge of our need for God's grace, it is unlikely given the rest of Jesus' ministry that he doesn't also mean what the prophets mean by "the poor" – like those who face serious disadvantage or marginalization.

"The worst problem, that which these groups have in common, is powerlessness and its consequences: lack of status, lack of respect, making one an easy mark for the powerful and unscrupulous." - Donald Gowan

Justice, in the prophetic tradition, is about making sure that those who are disadvantaged aren't taken advantage of; that they are shown proper care by the community.

Sometimes "justice" is used in the Bible to speak of "**retribution justice**" – of the just punishment for wrong actions.

But most of the time it's "**distributive justice**" – like the distribution of appropriate help to those who are vulnerable. To "do justly" in the Bible doesn't usually mean seeking retribution; to prosecute offenders. It usually means giving advantage to the disadvantaged. Offering help and protection to the vulnerable.

Justice: (Hebrew: *mishpat*): "Refers to all actions which contribute to the maintaining the covenant, namely, the true relation between people – humans to other humans, and between God and humanity." – Rabbi Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets*

Mishpat, the word for "justice," is frequently paired with *tsedakah*, or "**righteousness.**" They are not identical, but they do belong together.

Justice refers primary to *the action* of making right what is wrong, which flows from righteousness, the *quality* or heart of a person.

Jeremiah 5:27-28 is an example of justice being broken:

“...they [the rulers] have become rich and powerful
and have grown fat and sleek.

Their evil deeds have no limit;
they do not seek justice.

They do not promote the case of the fatherless;
they do not defend the just cause of the poor.”

Jesus’ ministry is to be “good news” for those who find themselves in this precarious place of insecurity and disadvantage, vulnerable to be misused by others.

God expects that not only the rulers, but all his people, would share his heart to exercise “kindness, justice and righteousness on earth,” as Jeremiah 9:24 puts it.

For as Isaiah 56:1 says: “This is what the Lord says: Maintain justice and do what is right.”

Jesus consistently seeks out those who are marginalized in the society of his day:

- Those disadvantaged by family circumstances: widows and orphans
- Those disadvantaged by geography: strangers/foreigners
- Those looked down upon because of their occupation or social choices: “sinners,” prostitutes, and tax collectors
- Those marginalized because of a physical disability: the blind and the lame
- Those marginalized by disease: lepers
- Those marginalized because of their age: children
- Those marginalized because of their gender: women
- Those marginalized because of their religion or ethnicity: the Syrophenician woman or the Samaritan woman at the well

- Christopher Watkins, *Biblical Critical Theory: How the Bible’s Unfolding Story Makes Sense of Modern Life and Culture*

The forgiving work that Jesus will do on the cross forms us – the church – into a people who are to extend this ministry of kindness and justice into the world.

IV. Gracious Words

So how do the people who hear Jesus that day respond? We read they are “...amazed [or astonished] at the gracious words that came from his lips.” – Luke 4:22.

“²⁸All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. ²⁹They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him off the cliff. ³⁰But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way.” – Luke 4:28-30

Why the murderous rage? The Israelites listening to Jesus that day, they are furious because Jesus’ is expressing this grace that is being distributed out to the whole world, and they realize what this means.

The Israelites are not in the privileged position that they thought they were. They didn't have a monopoly on God or his grace. Jesus' justice is "distributing" the grace of God far and wide.

This is a challenge to anyone who believes God is "for us", but not "for them." It is a challenge to lay down our agenda and to take up what God is calling us to.

Life Group Discussion and Reflection

Open Up

When you hear the word "justice", what are some of the first thoughts that come to mind, or what feels are associated with it? Describe why you think that it.

Dig In

1. We find in **Micah 6:8** the clear mandate for us, as humans, to "Do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God." How is Jesus' own life and ministry showing us how to do this?

2. Why might it be important for God's forgiveness and grace – the "walking humbly" – be important as we think about issues of justice in our world? In what ways might it protect us from a sense of superiority, a kind of reverse-bigotry?

3. **Read Luke 4:14-21.** The climax of Jesus' ministry includes his death on the cross, and subsequent resurrection. He will bring spiritual freedom for those oppressed and bound by sin. He will also demonstrate concern for the physical and social needs of his world.
 - a. Why do you think that both the spiritual and physical matter to Jesus?

 - b. Do you tend toward helping with the "spiritual" or the "physical" needs of people? How might Jesus' example help you grow in the other area?

Prayer

Take time to thank Jesus that he shows us the God of justice and invites us to join his merciful work in the world. Share any prayer requests with your group. Pray for our community; that we would grow our hearts more and more in alignment with God's heart for justice.

Additional Notes:**Ministry by Ordinary Means**

It's true, Jesus met many of those needs for healing in a miraculous way. The miraculous is an important part of ministry, but it's not the only way Jesus expects us to meet the needs of others. It's probably not even the main way.

As we saw in the parable of the Good Samaritan last week, at his own expense of time, effort, energy, and money the Samaritan cares for the physical needs of this injured man. And Jesus tells the Pharisee he's talking to – and he still tells us today: "Go and do likewise." May it be so for us.

Grace at the Centre

In the Isaiah text, there is a reference to "proclaim the year of the Lord's favour *and the day of vengeance of our God...*" – Isaiah 61:2

Why does Jesus exclude Isaiah's reference to the "vengeance of God" in Luke's Gospel? Is this to say that Jesus does not believe God in judgement day, or "the wrath of God?"

You can't read the rest of Jesus' teaching and come to that conclusion. But I do think it is a matter of *emphasis*. Jesus wants to assure us of what God's heart is like: a heart for healing and hope. I think he wants to emphasize the goodness of the Good News he is proclaiming. That God is gracious and kind. It offers an invitation to come into line with God's will and God's ways.