

*The Nature of Things*  
*Part 5 – The Nature of Justice*

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ October 16, 2016 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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-Children's Sermon – set the context for Isaiah – things were hard...God promised to make things right

<sup>1</sup>The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,  
because the Lord has anointed me;  
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,  
to bind up the brokenhearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives,  
and release to the prisoners;

<sup>2</sup>to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,  
and the day of vengeance of our God;  
to comfort all who mourn;

<sup>3</sup>to provide for those who mourn in Zion—  
to give them a garland instead of ashes,  
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,  
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.  
They will be called oaks of righteousness,  
the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.

<sup>4</sup>They shall build up the ancient ruins,  
they shall raise up the former devastations;  
they shall repair the ruined cities,  
the devastations of many generations...

<sup>8</sup>For I the Lord love justice,  
I hate robbery and wrongdoing;  
I will faithfully give them their recompense,  
and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.

<sup>9</sup>Their descendants shall be known among the nations,  
and their offspring among the peoples;  
all who see them shall acknowledge  
that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed.

<sup>10</sup>I will greatly rejoice in the Lord,  
my whole being shall exult in my God;  
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,  
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,  
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,  
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

<sup>11</sup>For as the earth brings forth its shoots,  
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,  
so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise  
to spring up before all the nations. (Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11, NRSV)

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My wife and I just watched the movie *The Big Short*, a drama which uniquely chronicles the sub-prime mortgage crisis which led to the collapse of the housing market and the Great Recession from which we are still struggling to emerge. Even having watched the movie, however, I still don't understand all the factors that led to the crisis. Different levels of blame could be assigned to various financial institutions, regulators, credit agencies, government housing policies, and

even consumers. Two things were clear, however, at least according to the movie's version of things. One, lots of people suffered as a result of this crisis. Two, much of the damage was caused by the extraordinary greed of certain influential individuals, many of whom were never held accountable for their actions.

Now, if that in fact happened, that's not right. There's no justice in that. Again, I don't fully understand how the whole crisis unfolded, and I'm certainly not trying to make any political statement here, but if certain people motivated by greed acted unethically to profit at the expense of other people and then got away with it, that's just not right.

Of course, that's only one of a thousand examples of injustice I could cite because injustice is everywhere. Even a hurricane can leave us calling for justice. How is it fair that Hurricane Matthew rips through Haiti and over 1,000 people are dead in its wake? That's not right. It's made worse by the fact that in these disasters it's almost always the poor who lose their lives. For the most part, rich people have the means to get out of the way when a hurricane is bearing down. I'm not saying that it would be better if rich people died as well; I'm saying that it would be better if nobody died. Why do we live in a world where weather patterns kill people? That doesn't seem right. Is that how things are supposed to be?

No, it's not. And deep in each of us is buried this sense that the world is supposed to be different than it often is. Specifically, from the time we are children we know that justice is supposed to hold sway. Go spend time on any playground and listen to young children play a game together. As soon as one of them breaks the rules, what are you going to hear from the others? "That's not fair!" Even young children know that justice is the way things are supposed to be.

So where does that come from? Why do we all have such an innate sense of right and wrong, a gut feeling of how things are supposed to be?

Well, the English word justice comes from the name of the Roman goddess Justitia who stood for moral force in the judicial system. Her attributes were a blindfold, a scale, and a sword, and the point of these symbols is that justice should be carried out objectively, without fear or favor, and at times may demand punishment.<sup>1</sup> Justice is you getting what you deserve no matter who you are, and usually the implication is negative, that you've done something wrong and are now going to have to pay the price.

But I think most of us have a broader sense of justice than that. Yes, justice includes holding people accountable for their wrongdoing, but justice also includes seeing people flourish in life as they were meant to flourish. In other words, of course it's unjust when somebody commits a crime and gets away with it, but it's also unjust when a person starves to death because they don't have enough food to eat, or suffers a disease that impairs or threatens life, or drowns in a hurricane which floods their island village. Our definition of justice should be this broad because this is the way God defines justice.

How do we know? Well, God's Word is where we get the clearest picture of who God is and what God is doing in our world, and in the Bible justice is not only about people getting what they deserve. That's part of it, certainly, as there is plenty in scripture about punishment for sin. But when the Bible speaks about justice what it ultimately is speaking about is *shalom*, a Hebrew word that is usually translated peace but which means so much more than the absence of conflict or violence. *Shalom* is more about wholeness, about universal flourishing, about everything in the world working the way God intends it to work.

We see this clearly in the passage from Isaiah we just read. The prophet here is expressing not only God's desires and intentions, but God's promise. God wants the poor to have good news, the brokenhearted to find healing, the captive to be set free, the scorned to know favor, the naked to be clothed, the mourner to know gladness, devastation to be transformed into beauty, the outcast to be brought home, the sinner to be made righteousness, the guilty to be proclaimed holy. This is justice, *shalom* justice, and, as Isaiah tells us, God loves justice, so much so that he promised ancient Israel that one day he would send a Messiah to bring it about.

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<sup>1</sup> See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lady\\_Justice](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lady_Justice)

So, you see, it's not an accident that the first time Jesus got up in the synagogue to teach he opened up the scroll and read from this text.<sup>2</sup> You can read about it in Luke 4. Jesus is in his hometown of Nazareth and after reading this very passage from Isaiah 61 he declared to those gathered there that day, **"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in its hearing."** What sounds like religious mumble jumble to us came across crystal clear to the people there that day and they couldn't believe it. The carpenter's son is telling us that he is the Messiah, the one who has finally come to bring God's shalom. They were so furious with Jesus that day they tried to throw him off a cliff.

But Jesus meant what he said, and he proved it with his life. From that day forward, Jesus went about doing justice, healing the sick, restoring sight to the blind, bringing good news to the poor, welcoming the outcast, even raising the dead.

So, you see, when we find within ourselves this deep longing for justice, for shalom, for a world where things flourish as they are meant to flourish, we must recognize that this longing comes from the very heart of God. The creation longs to be what the Creator has intended it to be and when it falls short of this, something within us tell us it is not right.

But here's the problem. Secular Western culture, the culture in which we are immersed, has worked very hard to disconnect justice from its biblical roots, even from God himself. Now, don't misunderstand what I'm saying. I'm not saying that secular people in our culture aren't concerned with justice. They are! In fact, you can go to a place like Marin County where there are actually very few Christians and you will find many, many people there who are passionate about issues of social justice. There are even many atheists who are very generous, moral and loving people and who often show more concern for the poor than many Christians. So I'm not saying that our secular culture isn't concerned with justice because all of us, or at least *most* all of us, have this innate sense of what is right and wrong. What I'm saying is that many people these days have forgotten where this innate sense of justice comes from.

For many people these days, justice is simply common sense. It's logical that all people are treated equal, that all people should have equal access to food, and water, and education, and dignity, and a voice to express themselves. This idea has nothing to do with God, people would say, but is just the result of common sense and reason. Injustice is wrong because we just know it's wrong, not because there is some divine being out there telling us it's wrong. Justice is just the way things are.

Writer Tim Keller points out this disconnection of justice from its divine source is a problem for at least three reasons.<sup>3</sup>

First, the truth is that not all of us actually come to the same conclusions about justice when we use our so-called common sense. In India, for example, Hinduism has created a caste system, a ranking of classes of people which puts the priests as the highest, then the warriors and rulers, then the merchants and artists, then the servants, and finally the so-called Untouchables who are so far beneath even the servants that they have not even been treated as people and are given the dirtiest jobs and reduced to literally eating and drinking the dregs of the earth.<sup>4</sup> And even though Indian law some years ago outlawed this ancient form of discrimination, it is still widely practiced across the Hindu world.

Now, from our Western perspective we say that this is unjust. Of course we do! But if our convictions are simply based on some gut instinct that tells us that this is not the way things should be, what are we then to do when another culture responds by telling us that their gut instinct tells them that the caste system actually is the way things are meant to be? You see, if you take God out of the picture, and rely only on evolutionary biology, on natural instincts that just emerged within ourselves, then who is to say that some people were not meant to rule over other people. In the animal kingdom this certainly is true and we accept it as such. Why not with humans? Why is it that our ideas of how things should be are better than the ideas other people have on how things should be?

The German philosopher and atheist Friedrich Nietzsche was at least honest enough to see this problem. Like the rest of us, he saw that the world was full of destruction, chaos, suffering, exploitation and brutality. But he also recognized that if this natural world is all there is, then there is no transcendent standard by which we can judge what is just and

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 4:16-30

<sup>3</sup> I'm relying heavily here on Timothy Keller's excellent argument in *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Viking, 2015)146-153.

<sup>4</sup> Bruce Bickel & Stan Jantz, *Guide to Cults, Religions and Spiritual Beliefs* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House, 2002), 184-185.

what is unjust. While some things may feel genuinely wrong to you, they genuinely don't feel wrong to others and so who are you to impose your views of justice on others?

That leads to the second problem that arises when we disconnect justice from its biblical source. It leads people to a place of moral superiority over others as we are forced to say that our common sense when it comes to justice is naturally superior to your common sense about justice and if you were as smart or as moral as we are you would see things our way. Who says? If there is no divine standard of right and wrong, why is it that we get to determine what that standard is?

And this leads to the third problem Keller points out. Since it's my point of view against your point of view and no higher authority exists to mediate between us, the only way then for me to get you to conform to my point of view is to shout you down. I am right because I say so and if I have the power to force you to comply I will do so. This means that whoever is in power gets to set their own self-constructed standards of justice, whether or not those standards are actually in line with God's standards or not. If you are in power and you say that it's right to set up a caste system, who's going to stop you?

So can you see that there are serious problems with disconnecting justice from its biblical roots? On the other hand, once we acknowledge that justice is, in fact, rooted in the heart and mind of God and revealed to us in the Bible, that the sense of right and wrong we innately feel is divinely inspired, then these problems are immediately corrected.

For one, now we have a foundation on which to stand. This is God's world. He made it and knows it better than any of us know it. And God says that it's not right to say that some people are more valuable or worthy than other people because, as the scriptures teach us, all people are made in God's image. Secular Western culture believes this but we have forgotten that we believe this only because we, unlike people in some other parts of the world, live in a culture which has been deeply influenced by the teachings of Christianity. The abolitionist movement to end slavery had its roots in the church. The civil rights movement had its roots in the church. The environmental conservationist movement has its roots in the church. The gender equality movement has its roots in the church. Democracy itself has its roots in the church, in the teachings of the Bible and, most specifically, of Jesus himself.<sup>5</sup> And when we recover this understanding, we can stand for justice in the world, for God's idea of justice, and not come off sounding arrogantly superior or imperialistic.

In fact, we ought to come across sounding humble because when looked at honestly, God's standards for justice don't only condemn others but us as well. Theologian N.T. Wright puts it this way, "The line between justice and injustice, between things being right and things not being right, can't be drawn between 'us' and 'them'. It runs right down through the middle of all of us."<sup>6</sup> Yes, we may be led to point out the injustice of a caste system we see in Hindu culture, but are we also willing to recognize and confess ways in which our own society has labeled and even confined certain types of people into certain boxes according to race, or gender, or wealth, or education, or political views, or whatever? As Jesus warned us, don't go around pointing out the specks of dust in the eyes of other people until you've dealt with the 2x4 sticking out of your own eye.<sup>7</sup>

In fact, when we reconnect the roots of justice to the heart and mind of God, expressed to us through his Word, we find an altogether different way of confronting justice, one that doesn't resort to shouting people down or eye-for-an-eye violence. Specifically, the response of Jesus' true followers to injustice has never been violence but always love, and we see this modeled for us and, ultimately, made possible for us, at the cross.

Remember, the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, God's only Son, was God's response to the injustice of the world. God is a holy and righteous God who cannot simply wink and look the other way at the sin and rebellion of humanity. The world deserves God's wrath, God's punishment, God's justice. But unlike it was for the Roman god *Justitia*, God's justice is not blind, carried out objectively without fear or favor. When God seeks justice he is not fair with us. In fact, the last thing you ever want from God is fairness, for him to treat you as you deserve to be treated. No, there was nothing fair about Jesus dying on a cross which was meant for us. This was, as the great theologian Karl Barth once put it, "the righteous judge being judged in our place." And God did this because though he is a holy God of justice he is

<sup>5</sup> For an excellent reading of how the roots of these movements is found in the church see *Christianity on Trial* by Vincent Carroll and David Shiflett (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> N.T. Wright, *Simply Christian* (San Francisco: Harper, 2006), 6.

<sup>7</sup> See Matthew 7:4-5.

also a merciful God of love and God's love runs deeper, or at least runs through, his justice. Because God is holy and righteous he cannot stand for the injustice he sees in us all. But because God is loving and compassionate and merciful, he also cannot stand to see us get what we deserve. It is on the cross, therefore, where God's justice and love are both satisfied once and for all.

Therefore, if we receive in faith the grace that has been shown us by God, then the Spirit of Christ, full of justice and also full of love, flows into us and begins to equip us to go out into the world to join God in his mission of setting the world right again.

As we do go and confront injustice we can go with boldness because we know we are not basing our views on common sense or mere personal opinion but on the very Word of God. It doesn't matter if you sincerely believe that putting people into different castes is the way things were meant to be, Jesus says that is it's not the way things were meant to be and Jesus is the creator and savior of this world.

However, as we go to boldly confront injustice we also ought to go with humility because we remember that we have also failed to act justly in our own lives. Have I always treated other people made in God's image as God would have me treat them? Of course I have not. And neither have you. Let's never forget the log in our own eye when we try to help others with the speck in theirs.

Above all, as we go boldly and humbly to confront injustice let us go with love. At another place N.T. Wright points out that when it comes to responding to injustice the majority language of the world is the language of violence. He writes, "When people in power see things of which they disapprove they drop bombs and send in tanks. When people without power see things happen of which they disapprove, they smash store windows, blow themselves up in crowded places, or fly planes into buildings."<sup>8</sup> And in this let's not point fingers. When somebody cuts you off on the freeway what is your natural instinct? Is it to bless that person in love, or is it to use your voice, or your finger, or your gas pedal to respond in another way?

Jesus' way is the way of love and it is not the easy way. It is the way of turning the other cheek, the way of loving and praying for our enemies, the way of serving those who seek to do us and others harm. But the fact of the matter is, though the way of Jesus is not easy and potentially very costly, it is far more effective. Using violence or power to combat injustice very rarely solves the problem. It may keep a lid on things for a time but does it ever get us closer to the world God desires, to shalom justice?

On the other hand, when followers of Jesus, as individuals or as movements, respond to injustice with love, then the world is changed. Martin Luther King Jr. led a peacefully forceful protest of love that brought enormous change to our nation. Christian leaders like Desmond Tutu took the same pathway in South Africa and brought massive change with remarkably little bloodshed. It was the (mostly) quiet, prayerful revolutions that overturned the brutal and oppressive communism which ravaged Eastern Europe for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. And in unrecorded interactions every day, followers of Jesus like you and me advance the Kingdom when we encounter injustice in our neighborhoods, work places, families and schools and respond with love and humility rather than violence or vengeance.

Isaiah 61 describes a world that is, tragically, so unlike our world in so many ways. So what do we do with the fact that we are given this picture of a world marked by Shalom but live in a world that is still so marked by injustice, pain and suffering?

Well, one option is to cast it aside as a fairy tale, something we or somebody else only imagined. And if it's just a fairy tale, something that can never happen or perhaps was never even intended to happen, the best we can do then is to look out for ourselves and get the most that we can out of this life before it's all over.

Another option is to believe that Shalom is a vision of real world but just not this world, that we were made for another place which is our true home. In other words, maybe this world is beyond repair and God's true intent is that one day we will be taken to a better place where things actually work the way they are supposed to work. Lots of people have landed on this option. Most, if not all, other major world religions believe this is how things truly are, that this world is forever corrupt and so our goal is to escape it in the end.

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<sup>8</sup> Wright, *Simply Christian*, 225-226.

Any honest reading of the Christian Gospel, however, leaves no room for these first two options.

Instead, the option given to us by Isaiah, and by all the prophets, and by all God's Word, and by Jesus himself, was the option of hope. For in God's Word we not only see God's intent but God's promise. And God's promise, which takes on flesh in the person of his Son Jesus, is that God loves this world, all of this world and its people best of all, and that when God came in Christ to die and bring healing for the sin and injustice of this world, he also, three days later, rose from the dead to lead the way for the restoration of all things, for God's Kingdom to come and his will to be done, *on this earth as it is in heaven!*

Those who follow him in faith, therefore, are invited into this resurrected life to join him, even now, in seeing this Kingdom realized in whatever corner of this world we occupy. And one day he has promised to come again and on that day the poor will receive good news, the captives will be set free, the blind will regain sight, the oppressed will go free, and the year of the Lord's favor will be established forever.

Let us pray and, as we pray also work, for the coming of this day.

Amen.



## The Next Step

### A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 again. What do you notice here? Which for you is the most striking image presented here?
2. The first time Jesus speaks publicly in the synagogue he gets up and reads from this passage in Isaiah 61 and then says, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in its hearing." (Luke 4:16-30) Why does he do this? What does he mean? Why did this make people so mad?
3. Do you believe that the world we live in will ever fit the description given here by Isaiah? Will we ever know shalom (i.e. universal flourishing)?
4. What is justice? How do you define it?
5. Do you think we live in a society that is more or less unjust than other societies around the world and down through history? By what standards are we judging ourselves and others?
6. It was stated that the world's natural response to injustice is violence, but that Jesus' response is always love. Do you agree? Even if you do agree, is this even a practical way to live?
7. When Jesus went to die on the cross was that an act on his part of justice or an act of love?
8. What is one injustice, small or big, which you feel like Jesus is leading you to join him in confronting? What is one step you could take towards doing so?



### Table to Table Question

#### *A question for kids and adults to answer together*

Why do you think we always want things to be fair?  
 What is one unfair thing in this world  
 which you think God wants to fix?