

Justice

These two weeks, we're doing this series called Second Chances to observe national Second Chances Month of April. They do this to bring awareness to the second prison many in our society face when they are released from prison. By many counts, there are tens of thousands of laws that adversely affect someone who has been incarcerated. They can't vote. It's hard for them to get a job, get a degree and in some cases, even volunteer in their community.

Not only that, if you're a man who spent 10 years in prison, it didn't just punish you, it punished your wife and children because they went 10 years without one bread-winner. It often leaves the children in poverty and without a father, which are two of the greatest risk factors for criminal behavior. Entire communities then get trapped in this cycle of crime and poverty. Something has to give.

Last week, we talked about the Biblical concept of *mercy*. Mercy starts with the recognition that it's only by the grace of God that we are what we are. We looked at Romans, chapter 2, which tells us that God's kindness is the greatest motivator for change. If we're willing to accept God's mercy, we have to be willing to give mercy to others. Well, today, we're going to continue the conversation by looking at a couple of related words in the Bible—the words are "Righteousness" and "Justice." To get us

started, watch this clip from the Bible Project that will give you a great mental hook thinking about justice. *[Bible Project Clip]*

This is an amazing visual of what the Bible means by righteousness and justice, but let's dig a little deeper into these words. Then we'll see how we can apply them today.

I grew up in the Wesleyan denomination, which has always considered itself a "holiness" denomination. In other words, we didn't just focus on forgiveness we went beyond forgiveness to *holiness*; or another word we used equally was the word *righteousness*. What *we* meant by that word almost exclusively had to do with personal morality and purity. That meant we don't drink or smoke or swear, we don't associate with non-Christians and don't have sex because it might lead to dancing.

Now, in the Bible, righteousness does *include* personal morality—living soberly, sexual purity, don't lie, cheat, or steal. But growing up, I almost never heard of righteousness in terms of justice. Justice wasn't a Biblical issue for us. But as I've studied Scripture more, I've come to realize that when we do this, we ignore a critical theme in scripture.

In the Old Testament, the word "righteousness" is the Hebrew word *tsedeqa*. It means to live in right relationship with others. You don't take advantage of weaker people, you deal honestly with them, don't create more injustice—basically to do right by people.

The word justice, the Hebrew word *mishpat*, goes beyond *tsedeqa*. It has to do with your posture toward the vulnerable. It's more than just not creating injustice, it means you look for injustice—actively looking for people caught in the gears of society and try to lift them out of it. *Mishpat* is making other people's problems your problems. The Old Testament scholar Bruce Waltke says this about the difference between the righteous (*tsadiq*) and the wicked, "*The righteous are willing to disadvantage themselves to the advantage of the community; the wicked [in contrast] are willing to disadvantage the community to advantage themselves.*"

Righteousness (*tsedeqa*) means to maintain right relationships and structures—like family and church—that lead to human flourishing. Justice (*mishpat*), means to repair broken systems that cause people to suffer. Over and over in Scripture we're called to do these and yet we tend to neglect them and focus exclusively on religious practice and personal purity. But if we want to be faithful to Scripture, we can't do that.

Let me give you some examples. In the book of Genesis, God told Abraham he was going to bless the world through him and his descendants. Genesis 18, **"¹⁸Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. ¹⁹For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just, so that the Lord will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him."**

Look again. The “way of the Lord” is kept by doing what is “right” (*tsedeqa*) and “just” (*mishpat*). God says Abraham’s family will be special because it won’t operate the way the rest of the world operates. The rest of the world will take advantage of the poor, exploit the widow, orphan and foreigner, but Abraham’s people will not.

Later in the Old Testament, in Jeremiah 9:23-24, it says this, ^{“23}**This is what the Lord says: “Let not the wise boast of their wisdom or the strong boast of their strength or the rich boast of their riches...”** So, he talks about three types of people—the wise (or educated), the strong (people with power in society), and the rich. Three different categories of people, but they all have something in common: what they possess puts them in a fortunate place in society.

Now, he doesn’t say they’re bad because they have money and power. But he warns them that when you have those things, it’s easy to feel pretty good about yourself. More than that, it’s easy to use education, power and wealth solely for our own benefit—to impress people or live a comfortable life that insulates you from the cares of this world. But God says these aren’t things to be proud of. The only reason you have them is because God gave them. It would be like winning the lottery and pretending you’re a self-made millionaire.

But here’s what he says is worth being proud of, ^{“24}**let the one who boasts boast about this: that they have the understanding to know me...”** OK, that’s great, but

Jeremiah describes what he means by understanding God. Second half of verse 24, **“that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight...”**

Now, why is it so important that they understand that God delights in and exercises kindness, justice (*mishpat*) and righteousness (*tsedeqa*)? Because he wants us to be like him. Our call is not just to begrudgingly give money to charity, God wants *us* to delight in the things that *he* delights in—and he *delights* in righteousness and justice.

This is a theme we see too many times in scripture for us to ignore. And just like Israel, the church is called to be a different kind of community. We are called to be worshippers of God and we’re called to personal purity and we’re called to be a *righteous* and *just* community. In fact, I would go so far as to say that *you cannot consider yourself righteous if you ignore the poor and vulnerable.*

So, the question is, “who were the poor and vulnerable then and who are they today?” In the Old Testament, we have the big four—the *poor*, the *widow*, the *orphan* and the *foreigner*. The poor had no safety net, so if you had no family or someone didn’t show you kindness, you would often make yourself a slave or starve to death.

If you were a woman and your husband died, you were equally vulnerable—the options for women to earn a living were very few. The word widow at the time also included a woman whose husband divorced her. They had the same difficulty.

It would have been easy to take advantage of foreigners in that day because they weren't on their home turf. If you've ever been in another country, you've experienced what it's like to be vulnerable—the language barrier, you don't know the customs, and you stand out. God tells Israel not to take advantage of their vulnerability.

As we move to the New Testament, we see the same categories. But in Matthew 25, Jesus also lists six ways to do justice. Jesus says righteousness and justice means feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, showing hospitality to the stranger (or foreigner), clothing the naked and looking after the sick and imprisoned. All these people are in vulnerable positions because they're one incident away from disaster.

That brings us to the question of who are the vulnerable in *our* society? This is an important question because problems in ancient societies are different from today's problems. So, while a widow *could* be considered vulnerable today, because women are educated and not completely dependent on their husband like they were at the time, they can make a fine life for themselves.

But many single parents are vulnerable because we live in a society where it can be hard to make ends meet with just one income, especially when you have to get children that you have to get to and from school, the doctor and activities. Being a single parent can be an incredibly vulnerable position.

People experiencing poverty are vulnerable because they're just a broken water pump from not being able to get to work or pay their bills. And poverty is often generational. So, while a young couple just out of college with low-paying jobs might be financially poor, they may not be vulnerable because they have middle or upper class family that can help them out. But people stuck in generational poverty often don't have relatives who can help with a car repair bill. So, they often get trapped in a cycle of borrowing money at high interest rates and getting deeper in debt.

Immigrants can be vulnerable as well. I'm not talking about a surgeon from the U.K. or India, but many immigrants, documented or undocumented are vulnerable. Of course, the big news here has been the DACA program, but there are huge issues with our immigration system overall that need to be fixed. Regardless of what you think the political solution is, as Christians, we're called to protect the vulnerable.

Orphan's today aren't just kids whose parents have died. Kids who are abused and neglected or have an addicted parent may need a good family. Virtually every family study shows that a stable two-parent family is the best predictor of flourishing. And there are few things you can do that will make a greater impact on the life of a child than to foster or adopt a child who doesn't have that.

I don't have time to go through all of the ways people can be vulnerable in our society, but let me list a few more. Often, being a racial minority makes you vulnerable,

people with chronic illness, physical disabilities, cognitive and learning disabilities, mental illness, people with addictions. You don't have to look very hard to find someone who is at a disadvantage in life. If we want to be the kind of just community God calls us to, we have to pay attention to all of these areas of vulnerability.

Now, I know what you're thinking...that already sounds really overwhelming. There's so much need around us, where do we even begin. Well, let me see if I can help you think about doing righteousness and justice, but not be so overwhelmed.

First, remember that you don't have to solve everyone's problems. The fact is, you can't anyway. So, don't let the huge amount of need around you paralyze you into doing nothing. Do small, everyday things. Then pray and ask God, *is there a particular area of need you want me to be involved in?* And if he shows you, then just do that. You can't save the world. You can only serve where you are.

But then you might ask, "Well, whose going to take of the vulnerable?" That's when you need to that remember that we're not just called to righteousness and justice as individuals, the church is called to be a "just community." We're called to be different than the world, to have different priorities. We're called to give ourselves for the sake of the vulnerable.

So, one way to trim down the options is to work with us in the church. The ways we've chosen to do justice is through Together for Good and Prison Fellowship.

Together for Good is a ministry that primarily serves single mothers by providing host families for their children when they experience a crisis. Maybe mom needs to go to rehab or she has some other business to take care of and she just can't bring her kids along. Together for Good provides a temporary safe home for those children and allows mom to do what she needs to do.

They also provide opportunities for these moms to get together regularly so they're not so isolated. We've started hosting events here at the church. We watch the kids, provide lunch and an activity, but most of all, we provide the opportunities for friendship, which is often lacking in these mother's lives.

And we're just getting started with Prison Fellowship. Of course, next week, you won't be here at 10 either because we'll be running the Prison Fellowship Second Chances 5k. And we'll continue to get you guys through training to get out the prison to do mentoring and help prisoners as they reenter society.

I've mentioned this before, but what I really like about these ministries is that they facilitate relationships and relationship is the best equalizer. You see, it's easy for middle class people to give some money to charity. Certainly that's needed, but too often, even when you give money you perpetuate a power imbalance and you can unintentionally communicate that you're better than the person you're helping and you've come to save them. But when you develop a friendship—a relationship of give and take, it

communicates that you recognize that the other is made in the image of God and has equal value, worth and dignity even in the middle of difficult circumstances.

Let me mention one more thing—and this is critical to remember. If we want to truly be a just community, it needs to begin right here. There is a great deal of need and vulnerability right here in this congregation. We have people with physical disabilities and mental disabilities. We have people with chronic illnesses. We have single parents. We have people who are just scraping by financially. We have people who have been homeless, people who suffer from mental illness. We have people who have been incarcerated. We have immigrants and kids in foster care.

If we want to be the *just* community God calls us to be, we need *everyone* to dig in. There are some people in the congregation that, when they see a need, they answer. If everyone doesn't get involved, then it will be just a few people doing the work and they will eventually wear themselves out. That's why, if you're a part of this congregation, it's so critical for you to get involved. How do you do that?

Well, you start by getting to know people. Come on Sunday morning, not just to sit in service, but to engage with other people. Sit down in the beautiful commons, grab a cup of coffee and stick around for a while after church. Introduce yourself to someone new. Get to know them.

Talk to Pastor Keith and get yourself into a small group where you can form friendship in the church. Friendship opens the door to so many ways of serving people in the church.

Contact the church office and say, I want to know how to get involved. We have people who will sit down with you and learn your skills and passions.

Whether it's serving people within the church or getting involved in our outreach ministries, or just trying to become more aware of people in vulnerable circumstances, remember that the reason we do it is because we serve a God who delights in righteousness and justice.

When we were vulnerable in our sin, Jesus came down and became one of us—identified with us and took care of our sin problem by taking it upon himself on the cross. And now, we have the opportunity and the responsibility to give ourselves on behalf of other. My prayer for us as a church is that more and more, we will become people who delight in what God delights in.