

Justification and Justice

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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Isaiah 58

This passage never fails to shock me, and to really feel the shock of it, we have to understand the lives of the people Isaiah is talking to. More specifically, we need to picture the religious life of the people Isaiah is talking to. Verses 2 and 3 show us that, so let's go to those verses and see if we can't get that picture clear in our minds. What does their religious life look like? Verse 2 begins by telling us "Day after day they seek me out." So these are praying people, and they are worshipping people. They do their devotions every day. They come to the worship services every weekend. Isaiah says: "They seem eager to know my ways." Sounds to me like they are also Bible study people. They get together with friends to study Torah. They have vigorous theological discussions. They seem eager to know the things of God. Isaiah says "On the day of fasting..." So they fast. They don't just pray and read scripture, they fast as well. Verse 5 suggests they even put on sackcloth when they fast. So when it comes to personal piety, they go the extra mile. Isaiah says "They seem eager for God to come near them." They want, or at least say they want, to have a deep personal relationship with God. So there's the picture: praying, worshipping, bible-studying people who want to have a personal relationship with God. They sound like stellar citizens. If your children grew up like this, you'd be proud.

But listen to what Isaiah calls them. "Declare to my people their rebellion, tell the descendants of Jacob their sins...They are a people who have forsaken the commands of their God!" Wow! Isaiah calls them rebels. Isaiah calls them sinners. That's astonishing. How can these pious Bible-loving, daily prayer-saying people be called rebels and sinners? What's going on? Why the harsh words?

The problem is that their piety is not accompanied by justice. They fast and pray, but they don't do justice. Specifically, Isaiah says, they don't clothe the naked. They don't feed the hungry. They aren't doing anything to lift the yoke of oppression from the necks of the oppressed. Instead of seeking justice, they quarrel and engage in malicious talk. So Isaiah hammers these pious people "Is this not the fast that I have chosen, to loose the chains of injustice." "No matter how much Bible study you do, no matter how faithful you are in your prayer and your worship attendance, if all that stuff isn't accompanied by a passion for social justice, God is seriously displeased."

Social Justice. Can I just say how nervous it makes me to say those two words? Just saying that God calls us to practice social justice makes me nervous. Because social justice has

somehow become controversial these days. These days, calling for justice in general, and calling for social justice in particular, has the potential to put you in a certain category. A political category. We live in a time where some social activists with a politically liberal agenda are called 'social justice warriors.' So if you talk about social justice you get associated with them and their politics. This has even gotten strong enough that there are some ministers and church leaders who say that social justice isn't in the Bible. You can go on YouTube and watch their talks. All this makes ministers nervous. We worry that when we talk about social justice or preach about it people will think they are pushing a political agenda. This cuts both ways. Some will think "Yay! He's on my side!" Others will say, "Oh no, he's one of those social justice warriors." So I feel nervous about preaching on the subject and there's a bit of me that thinks, "Maybe it would be easier if I just preached a nice, safe sermon on prayer."

This cannot be. We have to be able to talk about justice because justice is completely Biblical.

I don't know how you can read Isaiah 58 and not see that God is passionate about justice. And the justice that he's passionate about is social: it has to do with how society functions, how we treat our neighbors, how we treat the poor, and what we do to lift the burden of the oppressed. Those are social concerns so I think it's fair to say that the passion God shows in this passage is a passion for social justice.

And this isn't the only place where God expresses this passion. God's anger at those who practice piety but pay no attention to justice shows up throughout Scripture. In Zechariah 7, God says to the people, "When you fasted and mourned were you really doing it for me? Or was it just a show." "This is what the Lord Almighty said, administer true justice...do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor." God hates piety without justice. Isaiah 1: "I'm tired of your worthless assemblies. When you spread out your hands in prayer, I hide my eyes from you! Wash and make yourselves clean! Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed, Take up the cause of the fatherless. Plead the case of the widow." Again: "Don't show me piety if you're not going to do justice."

Jesus makes the same point in Matthew 23: "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness." "You do piety. You neglect justice. I want both!" And in Mark 12 He skewers those master Bible study leaders, the teachers of the law, because "they devour widows' houses and, for a show, make lengthy prayers. These men will be punished most severely." They do great showy piety, but behave unjustly to the poor, and Jesus hates it!

Now, even as I recognize this inescapable Biblical truth, let's be clear about a couple of things.

First, not everything our society calls social justice is biblical justice. God's justice has a particular shape and a particular character. That character is rooted in His person and expressed in His law. Other people of different faiths and philosophies can have a very different view of justice from us. Even within the church we have differences. God's justice is really complex, so Christians have a long history of disagreement about what justice looks like. That's fine. That's expected. But we ought not to use someone else's really bad definition of social justice as an excuse to dismiss all social justice.

Second, even if everyone at LaGrave would somehow magically come to complete agreement about what justice should look like, we still might disagree on the best policies to bring that justice. We may all agree that the children of the poor deserve to have access to health care. But we might vigorously disagree about the best policies to bring about this just outcome. Some of us might think the best way to accomplish this just outcome is through the private sector. Others will think that government has to get more involved. People from different political persuasions will have different ideas about how to work out this social concern. That's fine. What's non-negotiable is a passion for justice for children of the poor. What Isaiah and Jesus leave no room for is a kind of faith that's all about prayer and personal piety, but never flows out toward the injustices and the inequities of the world.

Here's the positive way to state God's concern in our passage. God wants our justification to lead to justice. God wants our personal justification to flow into a life of social justice. Justification is the word we use to describe how God forgives our sin and restores our life. He does this by grace and sacrifice. In the Old Testament this happened through the sacrifice of animals, in the New Testament through the sacrifice of Jesus. God's intention is: If I know that I have been justified, If I know that my crooked, sinful heart has been straightened by God's grace, then I will be filled with joy and gratitude, and I will want to go out into a crooked sinful world and help make some crooked thing straight. I will want to do justice.

This is God's pattern throughout scripture. It's in the structure of the 10 commandments.

The first four commandments are more about personal piety, right? They are about our relationship with him. Vertical piety. Commandments 5-10 are about how we treat our neighbor. They are concerned that the law is kept and justice is done for our neighbor. The personal piety of the first four commandments flows out into the social justice of the last six. It's the pattern of Jesus' parable of the unforgiving servant. The king forgives his servant an impossibly huge debt and he expects the servant to go out and practice forgiveness to his

neighbors. When he doesn't forgive his neighbor, the king is furious because his justification does flow into justice. It's also the same concern James has in the New Testament. James says, faith without works is dead. If you claim to have faith, if you claim to have a passionate love for Jesus who justified you by his grace, but then you treat the rich with favoritism and do nothing to help the poor, your faith is dead. James says that true faith is justification that flows into justice.

This dependency goes both ways. James says faith without works is dead. That's true. But works without faith is also a problem. A passion for social justice without a renewed heart doesn't work well either. Social justice done the way God intends starts from a justified heart. It starts from a heart made new by the love of God. When justice has no love in it tends to become angry and fearful. When there is no love in our pursuit of justice, when it comes from a sense of outrage and a proud certainty of the rightness of our cause, the pursuit of justice easily becomes an excuse for vengeance, an excuse to smash our enemies.

But when your heart has been renewed by Jesus, your pursuit of justice has a completely different spirit. What was the motivation that led to the justification of our hearts? It wasn't outrage. It was love. An infinite love. A cross-shaped love. For God so loved the world...Jesus' desire to justify our heart came out of a love so big that, even though He was the only truly just man who ever lived, He gave up His life so that our crooked hearts could be made new. And when you start there, when His love is the foundation of your justice, you are ready to go out into the world, into really hard places, into places that seem hopeless and try as best you can to make a few crooked things straight. Even if you don't succeed, your attempts will at least be a sign of Jesus' love to a broken world. And His love will not fail to make all things just and all things new.

I want to close this morning with a story which shows the powerful connection between a justified heart and a desire for justice. It's a story about Martin Luther King. I didn't know this, but MLK was a somewhat reluctant participant in the Civil rights movement. His heart wasn't really in it. He had a nice church in Montgomery Alabama, he had a new wife and a new daughter, he was making a good salary. Other people in Montgomery were pushing him to get involved in the movement, and he had done a few things, but not with much passion more out of obligation. And now he was getting pushback. He and his family were getting death threats just about every day.

One night he was sitting in his kitchen watching his infant daughter sleeping in her bassinet, and when he thought about the threats, his heart started to waver. More than he wanted to admit, he had gone into ministry for the prestige and the security, and now those things were under threat. He wasn't sure he was up to the task at hand. The problems facing

the African American community were enormous, and he was just a 26-year-old minister. There in the kitchen he prayed: 'Lord, I confess that I'm weak. I'm faltering. I'm losing my courage. I am at the end of my powers. I've come to the point where I can't face it alone.'" Then in his kitchen he heard a voice saying "Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth! And Lo I will be with you even to the end of the world." At that moment something shifted in King. His heart was no longer his own, his heart belonged to Jesus. His heart was no longer a prisoner of his small middle class concerns and pleasures, his heart was no longer filled with the small concerns of middle class life, now his heart was filled with the deeper joy and passions of the kingdom. After that day, King wrote: "My uncertainty disappeared and I was ready to face anything."

Your heart belongs to this God too, and so does mine. So filled with His love and redeemed by His grace, let's go out into the world, let's find a couple of crooked things, and let's see if we can't make them a little straighter.

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