Good & Beautiful & Kind
Chapter 9 ~ Love in Public (& Afterword)

As we arrive at the final chapter of the book, we circle back to the theme of justice, which is fitting considering our theme for this year is Joy & Justice. As a reminder, justice is the right ordering of relationships…both interpersonally and systemically. Hopefully this chapter will reinforce what we learned in our previous series, *What If Jesus Was Serious About Justice?* For example, "*Justice is to be aimed at restoration, not simply retribution.*" (page 190)

"*…God is not to be loved 'first'; He is to be loved in and through all…In fact, to summarize and synthesize many of Christ's most essential teachings, to love our neighbor is to give what's due to God…Justice is one of the primary ways to love Him. It is essential, not an extra.*" (pages 181-182) Rich points to the apostle John (also known as the apostle of "love") to back up his point (see I John 4:20).

- *How did Rich's comment of NOT loving God "first" initially strike you? What do you think/feel after mulling it over? (Or, how would you say it differently?)*

- *Who would you prefer to not have to deal with? (This could be a specific individual or a certain type of person.) What do you think about the idea that your relationship with this person (or group of people) is the true measurement/reflection of your actual relationship with God?*

Personally, I think we (Christians) talk a big game about "love" more than we actually live out love. I recognize the limits of my own willingness to love. I pray regularly that God would increase my willingness and capacity to love others well.

If we've learned anything this year, my hope is that we've learned love and justice aren't separate things but rather a commitment to the same thing. As Rich points out, "*Love must transcend our individual experiences. It must encompass the larger interpersonal and institutional realities we find ourselves in.*" (page 183)

- *Let's play with Rich's observation that the word "justice" is a Rorschach test. What comes to mind, and what do you feel, when you hear the word "justice". (see pages 184-185) What does your reaction to "justice" reflect—a culturally-formed understanding or a Biblically-formed understanding?*

God does not have favorites…but God does have priorities. Those who are oppressed, mistreated, marginalized, overlooked, poor and needy, etc., are near and dear to God's heart. And God wants His people to share His heart for such people. To not share God's heart for such people is what produces injustice. To say it another way, to "love God" is to care for those God cares for.

Scripture is clear…God cares more about how we treat others (justice) than about our personal piety practices. Or, to say it another way, if our (personal and communal) practices aren't

helping us become more caring of others, then they are pretty worthless and not as God-honoring as we think.

God is love…so we love. God is just…so we work for justice. Remember, our goal, as Christians, is to become like God, to imitate God, to reflect/represent God to the world. We take our cues from God.

What does this look like practically? Rich offers us this, "*It's an act of organizing life through mutuality and not coercion, humility and not dominance, generosity and not greed, compassion rather than indifference.*" (page 189)

- *How would you describe your heart for the poor and powerless? How do you prioritize them in your life?*

"*The work of justice requires a theological and emotional reimagining.*" (page 191) Toward that end, Rich offers us some obstacles/barriers to be aware of…

➢ Meritocracy--The belief that individual effort is what is ultimately responsible for one's success, as opposed to wealth, connections, or social standing. This idea runs deep in the American value system that we have all been shaped by. I suspect most of us look at the bulleted points at the top of page 193 and agree with those statements on some level. But things aren't that simple. And as Rich points out, "*It's ironic that Christians who believe in salvation by grace and not our merit can be so formed by a social theology of meritocracy.*" (page 193) Additionally, what meritocracy tends to ignore is the reality that some people are privileged/advantaged while others are not or are even disadvantaged. What makes the false narrative of meritocracy so powerful is that it is partly true. Does individual effort matter? Of course. But it's far from the only factor in the equation. And what God cares about is how we care for the disadvantaged.

- *How has your thinking been shaped by meritocracy? Or, in what ways are you tempted to buy into some of the ideas of meritocracy?*

- *Every society and culture has those who can be categorized as advantaged and disadvantaged. In our society/culture, who is advantaged and who is disadvantaged? What is a Christian/Kingdom response to this phenomena?*

➢ Me-Oriented Catharsis—Personally, I would just call this "virtue signaling". Making a justice-oriented statement on an issue isn't the same as actual justice. But our social media immersed culture makes us feel as if we've actually done something by posting about it. Rich has some pointed words, "*But diagnosis is not justice. Naming the problems is not justice. It might be the start of justice, but it can never be the end…Outrage is a great brand builder but a poor justice maker.*" (page 193-194)

- *How do you turn your feelings regarding injustices you observe into action? What are some actual action-oriented solutions you have pursued?*

- ➢ Theological Sidestepping—Debating over doctrine, theology, or the Bible instead of engaging in actually loving our neighbors who are suffering injustice. This is an easy one to fall into, friends. Churches are notorious for this. While orthodoxy is important, love supersedes everything else. We have ample evidence in the gospels of Jesus getting upset at this very thing.

- *What examples of "theological sidestepping" have you seen or experienced? What particular issues tend to get sidelined while we get bogged down in theological correctness?*

The amount of need and suffering in the world can feel overwhelming. It can be paralyzing. I feel that way. But as Rich points out, "*We are not called to fix the world but to faithfully respond with the resources, strength, and love we have…the call to justice is not about fruitfulness but faithfulness.*" (page 195) Part of faith is trusting that God can/will take our little, feeble, attempts of love and magnify them for His glory and purposes.

Injustice has many levels. Thus, ways of addressing it have many different levels. We can't be involved in everything…but we can be involved in something on some level. "*Not all of us are called to the same level of engagement, but we are all commissioned by Christ to serve those around us in concrete ways.*" (page 191)

With that in mind, something else we need to avoid is making the particular issue we are concerned about or involved with THE issue everyone else needs to be involved with too. Just because we may feel called to a particular cause doesn't mean it should be a litmus test for another believer's maturity or commitment to Christ. A trap we can fall into is judging others (rather self-righteously) when they're not involved in or as committed to the same things we are. That's simply unhelpful. Let's celebrate what others are putting effort into while championing what we're putting our energy toward. Thankfully, there are many organizations, ministries, and other congregations out there with whom we can connect/team up to pursue specific issues.

- *What is a particular justice issue that weighs heavy on your heart? Who have you found that shares that burden? What practical action steps can you take (or have you taken) to be involved in pursuing justice?*

Rich closes out this chapter by offering some guidance on what justice (which, again, is an act of love) demands/requires of us…

- ➢ Our Dignifying Attention–We honor and dignify people when we truly see them as fellow image-bearers of God. Unfortunately, due to the culture we're immersed in, we have been trained to view people in less than dignifying ways. This "training" has been largely unconscious. But whenever we look down on people, or consider some people as "less than…", or objectify/commodify people, or judge others, we demonstrate how we've been malformed. This, then, contributes to and reinforces injustice. Conversely, the fruit/evidence of the Spirit's work in our lives is when we can look upon others with

dignity, worth, and value or, as Rich puts it, "*a loving gaze*" (page 196) and give them our attention. "*Justice requires us to attend to people, to see them, to truly recognize their presence. It's the refusal to depersonalize people into mirages.*" (page 198)

- *Describe a time when you overlooked, ignored, disregarded, or avoided somebody. What were you trying to avoid? Describe a time when you were not seen or considered.*

➢ Our Local Focus–It is easy to keep "love" in the abstract, conceptual realm. But real love is practical and requires action. I would describe local focus as "embodied engagement". We can only be embodied where we are actually present, in person. As Rich puts it, "...*we are called to put flesh on our theology*." (page 199). Friends, you and I are going to have very little impact on what happens in Washington D.C. But we can have a pretty big impact on those right around us.

- *Do you spend more mental and emotional energy on national issues or local issues? Where can (or do) you spend your physical energy?*

- *Who benefits from your personal presence? Who benefits from our collective presence as a church family (besides ourselves, of course)?*

➢ A Countercultural Community–The Church is the physical representation/manifestation of the Kingdom of God on earth. We are those who recognize Jesus as the rightful King. As such, we are to offer the world a glimpse of what it looks like when Jesus is in charge. Ideally, when people see the Church (the Christian community) they should see Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Goodness, Faithfulness, Gentleness, Self-Control (i.e. the Fruit of the Spirit; see Galatians 5:22-23) as well as Justice, Generosity, Compassion, Courage...among many other characteristics.

- *How is our life as a church family pointing people to the reality that Jesus is their king? How are we as a church family offering the world around us an alternative to the status quo?*

As Rich mentions in the Afterword, this book can be summed up with one word...Abide. Lo and behold, our theme for 2027 is...Abide! Coincidence? I think not. Friends, the beginning point and the ending point of the Christian life is the love of God, which we are called to abide in, to dwell in, to rest in, to live in. This is what we are made for. And it's from the abiding love of God that we are transformed and from which we contribute/participate in the ongoing transformation and healing of the world. We're going to spend the next year learning to Abide!

Soul Training Exercise ~ Dignifying Attention/Loving Gaze

Pay attention to every interpersonal encounter you have this week. Are you offering people (family, friends, coworkers, strangers, etc.) the dignified attention they deserve? If this is a struggle for you, make it a matter of prayer...allowing God to love us so we can love others.