

Good Politics ~ The BE Campaign
BE Good ~ BE Just ~ BE Merciful ~ BE Humble

*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

Week 2 ~ BE Just

“*That’s not fair!*”, we’ve all heard someone desperately cry. Perhaps we, ourselves, have exclaimed it. It’s a phrase even the youngest humans learn to say. As N.T. Wright says, “*You don’t have to teach children about fairness and unfairness. A sense of justice comes with the kit of being human. We know about it, as we say, in our bones.*” And yet, Wright goes on to say, “*We all know there’s something called justice, but we can’t quite get to it.*” As humans there’s something deep within us that longs, even aches, for a world put right, even as we are regularly reminded of how un-right, how unjust, our world actually is.

But what exactly is “justice”? Here are a few dictionary-type definitions...

- The principle or ideal of moral rightness: Equity. Conformity to moral rightness in conduct or attitude: Righteousness. The upholding of what is right and lawful, especially fair treatment or punishment in accordance with honor, standards, or law: Fairness. The quality of being fair or impartial.
- What society regards as “right” based on moral concepts of ethics, rationality, law, religion, equity, and fairness.
- The concepts of fairness, equality, moral behavior, lawfulness, and order.
- The quality of being righteous; Rectitude. Impartiality, fairness; the quality of being right or correct.
- The concept that individuals are to be treated in a manner that is equitable and fair.
- Giving each person what they deserve.

What do you notice about these definitions/descriptions? I notice an appeal to something beyond us, above us, outside of ourselves that needs to be understood and agreed upon, and consistently applied. While dictionary definitions are nice and all, as people of the Word, we want to know what the Bible has to say on the matter.

The word translated “just” or “justly” in Micah 6:8 is the Hebrew word “mishpat”. This word occurs over 400 times in the Old Testament, often translated as “justice” (and basically carries the same meaning as the dictionary definitions above). But here’s what’s interesting: it’s regularly connected to another Hebrew word “tzedakah”, which is often/usually translated as “righteousness”, and occurs over 150 times in the Old Testament. Dr. Tim Mackie describes the difference between these two words this way: “*tzedakah is the standard of right, equitable relationships, and mishpat are the actions taken to create that standard and do it.*” In the Old Testament these words, concepts, ideas are inseparably linked, and regularly appear together.

For example, “*David reigned over all Israel, doing what was just (mishpat) and right (zedakah) for all his people.*” (I Chronicles 18:14) Similarly, “*The Lord loves righteousness (zedakah) and justice (mishpat); the earth is full of His unfailing love.*” (Psalm 33:5) Or consider, “*I put on righteousness (zedakah) as my clothing; justice (mishpat) as my robe and my turban...The Almighty is beyond our reach and exalted in power; in His justice (mishpat) and great righteousness (zedakah), He does not oppress.*” (Job 29:14; 37:23)

Whenever one of these words is referenced, the other ought to come to mind, regardless if it’s mentioned or not, as is the case in Micah 6:8. Interestingly, in Greek there is one word that can be translated as justice or righteousness in the New Testament (dikaiosyne), as we saw in our Sermon on the Mount series, “*But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness...*” (Matthew 6:33)...you can switch out the word “justice” and it would still be accurate. Here’s a video link to a short video that describes justice/righteousness well.

<https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/justice/>

- *How do you define “justice”? Who gets to define what is fair, right, and just?*
- *When you think of “justice”, what categories, topics, or issues come to mind? Where do you see injustice? What wrongs need to be made right?*

Justice is not just a topic mentioned in Scripture, rather it is a key thrust of the whole Biblical story. Justice is about making things right. By the third chapter of Genesis we see things go terribly wrong. The whole rest of the scriptural narrative is about God working to make things right again...i.e. working for justice and righteousness amidst His creation. As we read in Revelation, “*He who was seated on the throne said, ‘I am making everything new!’*” (Revelation 21:15) This is the through line of Scripture; this is what God is up to; this is what we are called to join Him in.

For some very odd reason, Justice is a controversial subject in the Church today. It’s odd because it is so clear in Scripture that there really should be no confusion on the matter. But, unfortunately, there are some brothers/sisters out there who mistakenly believe that the work of the Church is simply “saving souls” or just “preaching the gospel”...essentially, they believe, the focus should be on “spiritual” stuff. They think that justice work (be that addressing physical needs/issues, or fixing corrupt, unjust systems and structures) is somehow different or other than Kingdom work. (To be fair, there are some who focus only on physical needs without ever articulating the Gospel...this too can be a problem.)

Friends, this is a false dichotomy. While Greek philosophy, which much of western civilization is built on, likes to think in terms of a physical/spiritual dualism, with the spiritual taking priority, the Biblical authors do not think in such terms. The worldview of the Bible is holistic, with the physical and spiritual as interlocked, interweaved, and overlapping. Kingdom work, therefore, is both spiritual and physical. Love, the chief command, addresses the physical and the spiritual. We don’t just proclaim the Gospel, we embody it, we demonstrate it. Or, to say it another way, Kingdom work is about God’s will be done on earth as it is in heaven...God wills the good of His

creation...God cares about all the dimensions of human health and flourishing (mental, emotional, physical, social, financial, spiritual, environmental, vocational)...all of it!

- *In your experience, how have you seen the unnecessary friction or separation between the spiritual and the physical play out? How do we avoid this?*

Interestingly, and suspiciously, we see this false dichotomy bubble up in more affluent places among relatively wealthier people. (Like, say, the United States.) There seems to be a tendency for richer people to try and justify/rationalize not helping poorer people. Or more subtly, perhaps even unconsciously (I'm trying to be as gracious and charitable as I can here), wealthier people try to avoid seeing the need and plight of the less fortunate by insulating themselves or distancing themselves from them. Additionally, it's richer people who end up holding public office and creating policy that gets played out in systemic and structural ways. Because money is inextricably linked to power, richer people tend to be in the power positions. Add to that, in the United States, the difference between rich and poor has strong racial connections given a history of slavery, Jim Crow laws, redlining, etc.

- *As followers of Jesus and citizens of His Kingdom what are we called to do regarding injustice? What are the various ways in which we can work for justice?*

While justice is definitely a political issue, one of our hopes for this series is that we come to see politics as beyond just the realm of government and public policy (though it certainly includes that). The Church is a political entity, representing a God of Justice and called to Love our Neighbor (and even our enemy). We don't sluff off the work of Justice to the government. It could even be argued that it is our priestly and prophetic duty to show governments how to do it. When the world looks at the Church they should see a glimpse of heaven. We don't need the government's approval or permission to do the work of Justice in the world. But we do need some Holy Spirit inspired wisdom, creativity, compassion, and courage. Thankfully, we do have the Holy Spirit. So the question becomes, will we avail ourselves and yield ourselves to the Spirit in order to do the work we are called to do? Will we prioritize Justice the way God prioritizes it?

Friends, we all understand the clarion call in Scripture to love our neighbors. Given that, we need to embrace the fact that it is impossible to love our neighbors while ignoring injustice. Where there is poverty, where there is oppression, where there is inequity, where there are the needy and downtrodden, we need to be there. Not only to provide immediate help and relief, but addressing root causes to such problems. This is the work of Justice.

At its core, Justice is an issue of Power and how it is used. Or to say it another way, we can't talk about Justice without talking about Power. At its root, injustice is a misuse/abuse of power. Every human being has some level of power...and, yes, some have more than others. Regardless, the question is, what do we do with the power we have? With the agency that I possess, am I going to ultimately be self-serving or trust that God has me covered so I can focus on loving my neighbors? Beyond the power that any one individual possesses, groups, collectives, and countries possess power as well. Again, how power is used contributes to justice or injustice. Do groups, collectives, countries use the power they have for the common good, for just themselves,

or for the select few? Importantly, how do they use power as it relates to those not of their group?

As followers of Jesus and citizens of His Kingdom our primary arena of concern regarding how power is used is in our personal agency AND in how it is used in our chief collective, the Church. Secondly, we concern ourselves with how power is used by the State. Remember from last week, our primary identity is as Christians...who just happen to reside in the United States. So, YES, we are concerned about justice within the United States (and the whole world for that matter), BUT in order to have a voice of integrity to speak into that, we need to make sure our house is in order, so to speak. Does the Church reflect Kingdom justice? Do you and I use power in the way modeled by Jesus? "Good Politics" requires that we examine our own use of power in the various spheres and relationships we find ourselves in.

- *Consider your own personal power for a moment: What do you have direct power and control over? What can you affect directly and immediately? What sort of accountability do you have for how you use your power?*
- *What are some examples of people trying to gain power by being part of a group or collective? What do you think/feel about such efforts?*
- *What sort of power does the Church wield? How can the Church use its power in good, positive, healthy ways? What temptations might there be for the Church to use its power in negative, unhelpful ways?*
- *How have you personally experienced misuse/abuse of power (either as the victim or the perpetrator)?*

Back to N.T. Wright for a moment...

"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 each one of us. The ancient philosophers, not least Aristotle, saw this as a wrinkle in the system, a puzzle at several levels. We all know what we ought to do (give or take a few details); but we all manage, at least some of the time, not to do it.

Isn't this odd?

How does it happen that, on the one hand, we all share not just a sense that there is such a thing as justice, but a passion for it, a deep longing that things should be put to rights, a sense of out-of-jointness that goes on nagging and gnawing and sometimes screaming at us—and yet, on the other hand, after millennia of human struggle and searching and love and longing and hatred and hope and fussing and philosophizing, we still can't seem to get much closer to it than people did in the most ancient societies we can discover?...

And once again we find ourselves asking: Isn't it odd that it should be like that? Isn't it strange that we should all want things to be put to rights but can't seem to do it? And isn't the oddest thing of all the fact that I, myself, know what I ought to do but often don't do it.?"

Given the fact that you and I are far more complicit with injustice and misuse of power than we'd like to admit, and remembering what Jesus taught us about taking the plank out of our own eye (see Matthew 7:3-6), any focus on Justice should cultivate a deep sense of humility in us, perhaps even a sense of helplessness within us, which should, in turn, drive us to God...the source and standard of Justice. (And we'll get to humility in week 4.)

- *How do we account for the universal human desire for justice? Why do you think it's so difficult to attain?*

We get this longing for justice honestly, as they say, as image-bearers of God. God is just, so as His creation, tarnished, twisted, and corrupt as we may be, there's still something deep within us that yearns for justice—both to be just, and to live in a world that is just.

Obviously, since “politics” is about how humans order their lives together and function with one another, justice is a political issue/topic/question. Additionally, and as you've heard me say before, Jesus is more accurately understood as a political figure than a religious or spiritual figure. (In fact, to simply put Jesus into the religious/spiritual category is really to domesticate Him, and thereby dismiss Him.)

***A quick sidebar to make the case that Jesus and His Church are political in nature...

- Consider the labels/titles we use in reference to Jesus: Lord, Messiah, Christ...these are all political titles.
- Think about one of our favorite prophecies from Isaiah that we like to reference at Christmas time: “*For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on His shoulders. He will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever.*” (Isaiah 9:6-7, emphasis added) Sounds pretty political to me.
- Or how about another prophecy about Jesus' ascension from the book of Daniel, “*In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into His presence. He was given authority, glory, sovereign power; all tribes, nations and people of every language worshiped Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and His kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.*” (Daniel 7:13-14, emphasis added) Again, highly political language.
- Consider the crux of Jesus' message, “*The Kingdom of God is at hand...*” (see Matthew 4:17; Mark 1:15; Luke 4:43) Kingdom is political language.
- And then there's the Church. The Greek word “ekklesia” is the word we find in the New Testament that is translated as “church”. This is a socio-political term referring to a local

political gathering of citizens. If the New Testament writers had wanted to refer to a community gathered for religious worship and teaching, there were different terms at their disposal. But ekklesia fits the political paradigm of the Kingdom that they were shooting for.

End sidebar***

- *How is your imagination stretched when you think of the Church as a political entity? What do you think and feel about that concept/perspective? If it causes you discomfort, why is that?*

In their great little book *Resident Aliens*, Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon write, “*The challenge of the gospel is not the intellectual dilemma of how to make an archaic system of belief compatible with modern belief systems...The challenge of Jesus is the political dilemma of how to be faithful to a strange community, which is shaped by a story of how God is with us.*” A large part of what it means to be faithful is to reflect the Justice of God within our community (the church) and for the world around us to see. We are people who are shaped by the story of a Just God who is with us.

Stanley Hauerwas says, “*What must be remembered is that Jesus came preaching a Kingdom that makes it impossible for His followers to be indifferent to the injustices in their surrounding social orders.*” Or as Micah says, one of the things God REQUIRES of us is to act justly...or more accurately, to DO JUSTICE. “Requires” means not optional.

Justice is a HUGE topic. So much to unpack, discuss, and try to get our minds around. But it begins with us willing to come to the table and talk about it...with open minds, open hearts, humility, and willing to listen to others. Additionally, as Christians, when we talk about power, we MUST look at how Jesus used power. And when we look to Jesus, we see the Cross. The Cross MUST inform our understanding of power and justice. This is what makes Kingdom people different, unique, peculiar. We trust, or are learning to trust, that the way of sacrifice is the right and just way to use power, NOT domination. Moreover, God’s idea of justice and “fairness” is far more grace-infused that we are generally comfortable with.

Allow me to end this week by reflecting on one of Jesus’ parables. In Matthew 20:1-16 we read about a land owner who hires workers periodically throughout the day to work his vineyard. Some have worked the entire day...some have only worked for an hour. The workers expect, as you and I would naturally expect, that those who worked longer would be paid more than those who worked less. (That’s what’s “fair” in our minds, right?) But the landowner pays them all the same. When the workers who worked all day cry foul, “*That’s not fair!*”, the landowner tells them that he gave them what they had agreed to, and reminds them that it’s his money to do with as he sees fit.

We typically look at this parable from the perspective of the workers. But consider it also from the landowner’s perspective. He could have easily, and rightfully, paid the workers who worked a shorter amount of time less money. But he went above and beyond. The only “unfairness” in this story is what the landowner took upon himself.

We generally want an “even playing field”. That seems right and fair in our minds. BUT, what we see in God/Jesus is a willingness to have an uneven playing field, slanted against Him. And we are called to accept/embrace a similar “unfairness” against us. Biblically, it’s called...LOVE. A consistent theme we see in Scripture is this...

The righteous (or just) are willing to disadvantage themselves in order to advantage the community. The wicked (or unjust) are willing to disadvantage the community in order to advantage themselves.

We know this to be true because this is what God does, this is how God functions, and we are called to follow suit. As the source and standard of Justice, God is the One who gets to define it.

There is SO MUCH MORE we could say about Justice...we’ve really only touched the tip of the iceberg. We didn’t even get to the difference between retributive justice and restorative justice, though I suspect you can imagine which is more God-like.

- *If you opted to try the exercise from last week—identifying top 3 political issues/priorities, but without identifying which “side” of the issue you’re on—now try this: look at those same issues through the lens of justice. Who is vulnerable or potentially hurt or threatened? Who has power in the situation? What cost are you willing to pay to make it “right”? How do you think God looks at the situation? (Again, there may be some disagreement on these issues, but the point of the exercise is to learn how to talk to one another about such things, while maintaining dignity and respect for those who may disagree with us.)*

Soul Training Exercise ~ Gaining Empathy

We all have a certain amount of power. We all have a certain amount of time and opportunity. We all have a certain amount of knowledge and perspective. We all have a certain amount of connections/relationships. (By “certain amount” I also mean “limited amount”...but not necessarily a static amount...more of all of these can be gained, except for maybe time, but even that can be used well or wasted.) The question is: What are we going to do with it all?

Empathy can be defined as the ability to understand and share the feelings of others...to take on another’s perspective. Or, to walk a mile in another person’s shoes. To grow in love, goodness, justice...basically, to embody Micah 6:8, growing in empathy is in order.

This week, let’s put some effort in that direction. How?

- Identify a group of people who you would define as oppressed, victimized, marginalized, or overlooked.
- Do some research. Gain some historical perspective on their plight. Read a book or some articles; do some internet searching.
- If you have a friend or acquaintance who belongs to such a group, spend some time with them and learn from their experience and perspective.
- Basically, let’s get out of our bubbles and broaden our horizons. And spend some time with Jesus reflecting on all you take in.