

The Justice of God

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning. Let me add my word of welcome. My name is Martin Ayres. I'm the Senior Pastor of St Silas Church. It's great you could be with us, whether you've been with us all through lockdown and through this series we've been in, looking at Knowing the Living God. I think we're on week 10 now and we've got today and next week to go.

Or maybe this is your first time and you're just dropping in. Well, thank you for joining us and we hope you find it helpful. For any of us, we need God's help if we're going to know him better. So let's begin with a prayer.

Let's bow our heads and I'll lead us in a prayer. Gracious Heavenly Father, we praise you that you are the Lord for your greatness, your power, your glory, your splendor and your majesty.

Everything in heaven and on earth is yours. And yet, Father, that you condescend to know us, to speak to us, to call us as your children in Christ.

So, Father, we pray you'll speak to us now and give us ears to hear, heads that can understand your truth and hearts that are willing to respond rightly to you.

[1 : 0 8] For we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, we're thinking this morning about the justice of God. We live in a world of injustice.

We see around us the pain of crimes left unsolved, often for many years, as we know. We see this week a police car smashed up by vandals as the police tried to just go and stop an illegal party. All over the world, there are people who are wrongly convicted and imprisoned. There are people who live in the fear of crime or with the cost of being a victim of crime. We see other kinds of injustice.

We see the injustice of privilege and underprivilege, of advantage and disadvantage, that because of the country that you live in, or even the part of Glasgow that you were brought up in, or even the circumstances in the home that you were brought up in and raised in, that can have an enormous effect upon the advantages or disadvantages that you have in life.

So what does God say about injustice? The first thing we're going to think about is the justice of God in his radiant commands. The word justice and the word righteousness are closely related Bible words.

[2 : 2 9] To be just is to be in the right. It's about being righteous. And we see God's justice in his commands, in his word. So in Psalm 19, that we looked at really at the start of this series, Psalm 19, we read these words about God's word, the Bible.

Verse 8 of Psalm 19, The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes.

It's a great picture, isn't it, of as though we're in the dark, not sure what to make of the world, of right and wrong, of different views. And we open the book, we open God's word, and it's as though the word is radiant with light, and that light shines so that we can see the path that we need to follow.

It enlightens us to see everything else. And verse 9b, That is that God's words flow out from his character, and because he is morally pure and perfect, his words are righteous.

And he calls on us to follow his commands as his people, and by doing that, we see a glimpse of the righteous reign that he will establish when he comes again.

[3 : 5 1] Now this calls already for deep humility from us, because we don't always agree with all of God's commands. And people around us will say God's commands are not righteous.

But it's good to remember that our objections to God's commands are based on culturally formed ideas. We have a different moral compass that points in a different direction to God's word, but that moral compass hasn't come to us in a vacuum.

It's come to us through the particular time and place we live in. And so our objections to the rightness of God's word, if we have them, tend to come from what our culture around us thinks about right and wrong.

And it's just helpful to remember that, that if we asked somebody in the West End of Glasgow, what do you think about God's command that we, Jesus' words that we love our enemies and we forgive those who persecute us?

They would say, oh, that's good. That's the way forward. What do you think about the Bible's teaching about marriage and about sex and about family? Oh, that's socially regressive.

[5 : 06] It's harmful. But then you go to a different part of the world today and ask somebody, perhaps in an Asian culture context, a different context, what do you think about God's...

Well, the same things. What do you think about God's... The Bible's teaching on family and sex and marriage? They might say, oh, that's really good. It protects the vulnerable and it promotes wider society and well-being.

What do you think about Jesus' commands that we should love our enemies and forgive those who persecute us? Well, that can't be right. It's unjust. Where's the sense of punishment?

Where's the... How can you build a society on that? So that the issue becomes, why should your moral objections trump anybody else's?

Why should we think, really in our arrogance, that in 2020 in Glasgow, we happen to have found the right answers to all the moral questions so that when we hear God's word disagree with us, we think we're right and that therefore it can't be from God?

[6 : 18] Is it not far better to recognise that, just as we look at cultural blind spots, perhaps in history at the moment, that's a big issue, isn't it? That we're looking back at people's views from history, perhaps where there are statues of them, and we're saying, well, how could they have thought that?

Do we not realise that in 100 years' time, people will do exactly the same for us as well? And God's word actually liberates us so that with it being a moral word that transcends every culture and time, it's a word that we can rely on so that we're not blown this way and that by the latest ideological movement in our society, the latest moral agenda that gets pushed by the BBC into its dramas and kids' programmes or promoted in our schools, but rather we can judge these things through God's word that stands forever and can challenge and correct every culture, whatever time and place we live in.

And God promises in the Bible that the day will come when he will put things right, he will judge the world. So words from Romans 2, verse 6, God will repay each person according to what they have done.

To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honour and immortality, he will give eternal life. But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger.

In 2 Thessalonians, a similar promise, God is just, so it's about the justice of God, he will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled and to us as well.

[8 : 04] Writing to people who are being unfairly persecuted, saying, look to the day when God puts this right, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels.

Now that's not a popular idea today. All around us people pour scorn on the idea that God would judge and he would condemn wrongdoing in our world.

But actually, it is a wonderful thing to know that that's coming. If you just think about Harry Dunn, last August Harry Dunn was riding his motorbike along a road, apparently safely, the cameras suggest, and tragically, he was knocked over and killed by a driver who, she was driving her SUV on the wrong side of the road and the police, looking at the footage, said Harry Dunn didn't have a chance.

17 years old. The lady involved then pleaded diplomatic immunity. She's American and she flew back to America. She's married to a guy that enabled her to plead that immunity.

And so she's evaded the English justice system for that offence. And that story has run and run ever since. Just last week, it was in the news again about the rights and wrongs of that diplomatic immunity.

[9 : 23] Now, why are we still talking about Harry Dunn in our country, in the UK, when far worse things were done that day and far worse crimes have been committed since?

It was a tragic case of dangerous driving. But worse things have happened. But the reason why the story runs and runs is because we are appalled that somebody can evade the justice system. We long, we learn for justice. We yearn for justice. And it is good news, therefore, that God promises that we will never feel like that on the last day.

In the new creation, one of the things that will give God's people peace is knowing that God demonstrates on his judgment day that everything that everyone has done matters.

It mattered. It mattered to him. It's really good news. So that's our first point, the justice of God for an unjust, the justice of God in his radiant commands.

[10:27] Our second point, though, is a different dimension to God's justice. It's the justice of God in his heart for the vulnerable. We read this brilliant psalm, Psalm 146, and the focus in verses 6 to 10 is God's deep concern for people in particular need.

If you look with me again at verse 7, he, God, upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets the prisoners free. That's the unjustly imprisoned or those who are in captivity.

Verse 8, The Lord gives sight to the blind. The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down. The Lord loves the righteous. And then the needy of verse 9, The Lord watches over the foreigner.

He guards the refugee and the immigrants from exploitation. He sustains the fatherless and the widow. Now what we've got there in those verses is a group, the quartet of the vulnerable that come up again and again in the Bible when God describes his concern for the vulnerable.

And they are the widow, the orphan, the foreigner, and the poor. Those are the expressions in Bible times of those who particularly need help.

[11:42] And we see that theme through the prophets that God sends to Israel. God's people before Jesus came were Old Testament Israel living under the covenant that God had made with them through Moses.

And God had rescued them and he called them to continue in faith, trusting him. And in the outworking of that faith to reflect his justice in how they dealt with one another.

The prophets that God sent were God's covenant enforcers, calling his people back to that covenant with Moses when they'd strayed. So when they did stray, and they did, when they turned away from God, how did you see that in history?

Did they stop being religious? Well, remarkably, Israel didn't stop being religious some of the time. Some of the time, they continued to be extremely religious, going to the temple, bringing their sacrifices.

But God pointed to something that demonstrated that their hearts were far from God and it was that there was no justice in the land.

[12:51] They weren't concerned for justice in the way that God is concerned. Examples of that. Micah chapter 6. In Micah 6 verse 7, Micah asks what he should bring to God as an offering.

Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of olive oil? No. Look at verse 8. 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. Or in Amos 5 verse 21, God says this.

This is God speaking. It's extraordinary. I hate, I despise your religious festivals. Your assemblies are a stench to me. Isn't it shocking?

Verse 23. Away with the noise of your songs. I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river.

[13:52] Righteousness like a never failing stream. It's a theme through the prophets. Isaiah 58 would be another example. So when we act justly, when we help the vulnerable, when we help the victim, we display as God's people to each other and to the world something that deeply reflects the character of God.

Now what would that look like today? We hold it alongside knowing that supremely what people most need is to hear of Christ. They need to turn to Christ, put their faith in him and be rescued from the captivity to sin that they're in, from the penalty of sin that's coming and for the freedom of eternal life as God's children.

And yet, by holding that, we don't let go of God's heart for the vulnerable. Verse 9 talks about watching over the foreigner. That was for Israel then, but we could think today about immigration, about refugees who have fled to our city and our country for safety, about guarding people from

trafficking and exploitation.

Then it's the fatherless and the widow that we as Christians would be ambitious to care for single-parent families. Who are the vulnerable today?

A big issue today, of course, is racism. And we thought a couple of weeks ago about how it's a time to listen, to hear more about that, to learn from people who can point to ways that they've been treated differently because of their ethnicity.

[15 : 29] It's a time to repent, to examine our own hearts. It's a time to speak up for people. It's a time to pray, to pray for change. And there are more controversial issues of justice today.

It's actually, it's quite easy for us right now in Glasgow to speak out against racism. It's good to do that. It's really good. But it's not going to be particularly costly for lots of us right now to speak out against racism.

We're not going to get a lot of flag. It is much harder to speak up for the rights of unborn children. I know that is a really sensitive issue. I want to say whenever we speak about that, that we all depend on God's forgiveness, whatever we've done, and that grace is on offer through Jesus, however we feel, whatever we've done.

And we're going to look at that, the issue of abortion in August, midweek, as one of our hot topics. But it's important to say that when unborn children are not given the rights that they will be given once they go through the birth canal and are born, they are vulnerable.

Could it be that that's a massive cultural blind spot today, the rights of the unborn? Who else are the vulnerable? Verse 7 mentions the poor. We could think about the global poor, often without any way of getting out of their poverty.

[16 : 55] We can partner with experts on that, like Tier Fund, like Tradecraft with our commitment to fair trade, Compassion, who do amazing child sponsorship around the world.

There are the poor in our own city, the homeless. There are, there are, there's poverty among the elderly who are vulnerable. And within God's people he calls us to be radically distinctive.

That's our second point, the justice of God in his heart for the vulnerable. But there is a massive difficulty here. If we look at the start of Psalm 146, what we find is it's a song of delighted worship. Verse 2, I will praise the Lord all my life. I will sing praise to my God as long as I live. Then there's a warning to us, not to put our trust in a political party or particular movement for change.

Verse 3, do not put your trust in princes, in human beings who cannot save. But verse 5, blessed are those whose help is the God of Jacob whose hope is in the Lord their God.

[18 : 00] Here's the difficulty. How can we worship God with all that delight for his character of justice and love his justice when we know that we ourselves are on the wrong side of that justice in the things that we've thought and said and done?

That when we stand before God and the five worst things that you and I have ever thought and said and done are revealed for everyone to see, for God to be righteous, he's got to do something about our sin.

He actually needs to condemn our sin. How can we then delight in the righteousness of God? That brings us to our third point, the justice of God and his mercy towards sinners.

Now when Jesus preaches his first sermon that we've got recorded in Luke in the synagogue, he opens the scroll of Isaiah chapter 61. He speaks a prophecy about the Messiah and as he reads Isaiah 61, it's one of these prophecies about how, well it says, the Messiah will bring God's justice. The spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

[19 : 24] God is going to establish his righteous reign through his Messiah who's coming. But what Jesus did that day is dramatically, if you know the verses, he stopped before the end.

He missed out the next bit of Isaiah 61 verse 2. So if we were to read on, it says this, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour and the day of vengeance of our God.

Now why did Jesus miss out that bit about God's judgment coming through his Messiah? There hasn't been a change of plan from God. God had promised all through human history that he would count people who turn to him and trust him as righteous.

He is willing to call the sinner justified if we'll turn and trust his promise. And Jesus has come to make that possible first time before he comes again to establish justice forever.

So we read in Romans 3 of how Jesus accomplished that mission. Verse 21, But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the law and the prophets testify. [20 : 36] So God has made way, made a new, made not a new way that he, that we can be called righteous. How can he do that? Verse 25, God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement through the shedding of his blood to be received by faith.

He did this to demonstrate his righteousness because in his forbearance he left the sins committed beforehand unpunished. He did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

What's going on there, in other words, is that God is absolutely committed to both of those realities, that he will be a just God and known as a just God but he will also justify sinners.

He will call us righteous, the ungodly. So at the cross Jesus makes that possible as God demonstrates that he's righteous by a penalty being borne for the sin of everyone who trusts Jesus so that God can then offer mercy to us, to sinful people as we turn to him.

And that wonderful truth can change the world for it allows us to do the three things of Micah chapter 6. It allows us to act justly, to go out into the world seeking to do justice.

[22 : 03] It allows us to love mercy, that's about our heart, that we would celebrate and praise God for his heart for justice. But then it also says in Micah 6, walk humbly with God.

And as we see people all around us campaigning for justice, what we don't often see is humility.

What we see around us is self-righteous rage against the perpetrators of injustice.

We've seen that in recent weeks, haven't we, with the Black Lives Matter movement. As some of us have got behind, many of us have got behind that movement and fully stand for what it stands for, we've also witnessed, haven't we, self-righteous ranting on social media, on Twitter, on Facebook, self-righteous echo chambers applauding each other for condemning people who disagree with them, self-righteous graffitiing and statue defacing and statue destroying.

How do we show a different way where we operate as agents of change, seeking justice and mercy, but with humility before God?

Well, the gospel is the answer. The gospel of Jesus Christ because when the gospel grabs you, it empowers you to go out into the world ready to confront injustice, longing for justice, but with the humility of knowing that we are part of the problem as guilty sinners and that God has justified us through his great love and mercy at the cross.

[23 : 37] Let's pray together. Blessed are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God. Heavenly Father, we praise you that you are a God who upholds the cause of the oppressed, who is concerned for the widow, the orphan, the foreigner and the poor.

Grant us, we pray, a deeper conviction of our own sin, our own failure to uphold justice, so that we grow in our immense gratitude for your grace to us at the cross and our grasp of that grace enables us to act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with you, our God, for we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.