

What is Justice?

Series: Like a Mighty River: the Bible on Justice

Date: 29 August 2021, 13th Sunday after Trinity

Location: St George's Battery Point

Texts: Psalm 146; Job 29:14-17; James 1:22-27; Luke 1:46-55

Why this series?

When I was a teenager there was a lot of publicity in church-land about Jubilee 2000. This was an international debt relief campaign based on the Jubilee, in Leviticus 25, which stipulated that every 50 years in Jewish society, all debts had to be cancelled. Jubilee 2000 urged Western nations to cancel the debt of developing nations in the year 2000. 2000 came and went and Jubilee 2000 morphed into the Micah Challenge. This was in response to the UN's Millennium goals, the first of which was to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger.

Micah Challenge took its name from Micah 6.8

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.

Micah Challenge exists in many countries across the world, in Australia it's called Micah Australia. Their vision is *to see an Australia that acts justly for the world's poor, vulnerable and oppressed*. It's an advocacy coalition of various different Christian aid agencies.

Why this story? Jubilee 2000 and Micah Australia are just 2 examples of how the Bible has led Christians across the world to (a) recognise injustices, in this case poverty, and (b) do something about it.

Fast forward to the last few years and we've seen huge movements around what are often called "justice" issues. Black Lives Matter, focussing on Racial Injustice. Climate Justice. And this year in Australia our own #MeToo moment, where the spotlight has shone on sexual violence against women. Each of these has a sense of urgency. Something must be done now. These justice issues often become politicised and then weaponised, feeding into the growing polarisation of public life. Often the church is criticised either for not acting, or worse, being part of the problem. When I was growing up people asked is the Bible true? Won't it crush my freedom? Now it seems people ask, is it good? Isn't the Bible and Christianity simply a tool of oppression?

There are also competing voices within the church. Some say that doing justice is *the* mission of the church. At the other end of the spectrum some say that doing justice *compromises* the mission of the church to preach the Gospel. I take it that both are reading the same Bible, so which is it? Or is that a false dichotomy?

We're starting a new sermon series this week entitled, *Like a mighty River: the Bible on Justice*. My hope is that we'll be able to see what the Bible says about Justice; where that fits in the great scope of God's plan of redemption; what that means for our discipleship as followers of Christ and our mission as the people of God; how this might affect what we do as a church; how this should guard us from being drawn in to the culture wars; and how what the Bible does in fact offer great resources for tackling the not only the injustices in the world today, but also the injustice that lurks within our hearts. If you'd like to read up on this, a great way in is Tim Keller's book, *Generous Justice*. At the outset I want to say that what I

offer is very much a work in progress. I'm underbaked on this topic, and no doubt you have things to teach me. So if you like this series is an invitation to learn together with me.

So where are we going? We've got 7 topics

- What is Justice - today
- Justice and Mission
- A Time for Justice
- A Community of Justice

And then some case studies,

- Justice for Women
- Racial Justice
- Justice for Creation

Let's dive in.

What is Justice?

If I asked you that question, what would you say? When you stop and think about it this is not as simple as it first seems. It turns out that people have been puzzling over this question for thousands of years. Moral theologian Oliver O'Donovan argues that in Western culture we think about justice in 3 different ways.

First, we think about, treating people equally. He suggests that this is traditionally captured in the words "right" and is derived from Roman law. Second, we speak about justice as a virtue, where we treat others as they deserve. This ultimately comes from Greek philosophy. Third, we speak about justice as an act of judgment. That is, when people demand justice, they want something to be done. This O'Donovan says comes from the Old Testament.¹

The philosopher Alistair McIntyre wrote a book, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* in which he argues that in Western culture we have competing visions of justice in our society and that this underlies much of our political and social conflict. Drawing on McIntyre and a number of other scholars, in *Generous Justice*, Tim Keller suggests these are²

- Justice as maximising welfare. That is, justice is about making a society where the most number of people are under conditions that they can be happy.
- Second, Justice as Respecting freedom. That is, justice is about making a society where people are free to live as they see fit, so long as it doesn't harm anyone else.
- Third, Justice as Promoting virtue. That is, justice is about making a society that produces just people.

Generous Justice was published in 2010. Last year, in the midst of the Black Lives Matter protests, Keller published an article in which he added 2 more options.³

- Justice is about fairness, or treating people equally, and,
- Justice is about power. That is, justice is about subverting the power of dominant groups in favour of the oppressed.

Each of these takes on justice has a history and some high powered philosophers behind it. I don't claim to have a handle on them, but I hope you can recognise them as being in play in our culture.

¹ Oliver O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2005: 6-7.

² Tim Keller, *Generous Justice*, Hodder & Stoughton, 2012: 153-154

³ Tim Keller, 'A Biblical Critique of Secular Justice and Critical Theory', August 2020.

<https://quarterly.gospelinlife.com/a-biblical-critique-of-secular-justice-and-critical-theory/>

Amidst these competing accounts of Justice, what does the Bible say about justice? What is justice according to the Bible? For the rest of this morning we'll take whirlwind tour on this big topic that we'll delve deeper into over the rest of the series.

Our opening text from Micah shows us how God wants us to live.

To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

The verse begins with action - to act justly. Literally "do justice". The Hebrew word for justice here is *mishpat*. The verse then moves on to the interior motivation - to love mercy, *hesed* in Hebrew, the word for God's unconditional grace and compassion. The verse concludes with the vertical orientation of our lives - walking humbly with God.

Misphat

What then does *mishpat* mean? The word occurs again and again in the Old Testament.

In Leviticus 19.15 we read

Do not pervert justice (*mishpat*); do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly.

Here *mishpat* means to treat people equally, without partiality or favour.

Mishpat however goes beyond equal treatment. In Deuteronomy 10:18 we read,

[The LORD] defends the *mishpat* of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner, giving him food and clothing.

Mishpat is derived from the word *shaphat*, which means to give a legal judgment or to execute that judgment. The essential meaning of *shaphat* is "to take action on behalf of the wronged and put things right."⁴ That may mean confronting wrongdoers and punishing the guilty. But it also may mean vindicating and delivering those who have been wronged. Put another way it is both retributive and restorative justice. The *mishpat* in Deuteronomy 10 is the rightful case of the fatherless, the widow and the foreigner, against those who would exploit them. Or put positively, it is right and just to protect and care for these vulnerable people. Again and again in the Old Testament, *mishpat* describes taking up the cause of what some have called 'the quartet of the vulnerable' - the poor, the widow, the orphan and the foreigner.

For example, Zechariah 7:10-11 says,

"This is what the Lord Almighty said: 'Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. **10** Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor.'

The widow, the fatherless, the foreigner and the poor all have little social or economic power and are vulnerable to exploitation by those with wealth and power. According to the Bible you can judge whether a society is just by how it treats people like this.

Sedaqah

But the Bible's account of justice goes deeper than executing justice for the vulnerable. So often "justice" in the Old Testament is paired with "righteousness".

In Psalm 33.5

The LORD loves righteousness and justice;
the earth is full of his unfailing love.

The Hebrew word for righteousness is *sedaqah*. Fundamentally this is about right relationships - between people, between people and God and creation.

Proverbs 31.9 brings these two words together tightly

⁴ Chris Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, IVP, Nottingham, 2004: 260

Speak up and judge fairly; (that is *shapat sedaqah*, judge righteously)
defend the rights of the poor and needy.

This verse also shows that justice according to the Bible includes a special concern for the poor. Doesn't that contradict the notion of treating people equally? No. Because injustice is not equally distributed. The poor are more vulnerable to and more often victims of injustice. Think about this verse. Why doesn't it say, "speak up for the rich as well as the poor"? Because the rich don't need anyone to speak up for them. They can afford the best lawyers in court. The poor need advocacy just so they can be heard.

The last thing to add to this picture of justice in the Bible is generosity. We saw this right at the beginning in the year of Jubilee, when all debts were cancelled. Over the coming weeks we'll see more of how generosity was stitched into Israel's laws and common life.

*cf Psalm 112:5

"Good will come to those who are generous and lend freely, who conduct their affairs with justice."

Hebrew poetry is based on parallel repetition where the second line expands on the idea of the first. The effect of this verse then is that generosity and lending freely is conducting your affairs with justice.*

Old Testament scholar Chris Wright sums up this way.

Mishpat is what needs to be done in a given situation if people and circumstances are to be restored to conformity with *sedaqa*.

That is to say, *mishpat* is rectifying justice, putting things right. *Sedaqah*, righteousness, is relational justice, restoring relationships. Wright goes on to say that the closest phrase we have in English to translate the sense of "justice and righteousness" is social justice.⁵

Job shows what someone who lives out *sedaqah*, righteousness, looks like.

I put on righteousness as my clothing;
justice was my robe and my turban.

15 I was eyes to the blind
and feet to the lame.

16 I was a father to the needy;
I took up the case of the stranger.

17 I broke the fangs of the wicked
and snatched the victims from their teeth.⁶

Notice that Job used his social and economic power to not only care for the needy, but also to advocate for their cause, and to confront those who exploit them and perhaps even to change the system that allows them to exploit others. What might that look like today? Fostering Hope that Mary shared with us is living out the righteousness of verse 16 - being a father to the needy. To live like this might mean caring for those with disabilities. Advocating for refugees and helping them find work. When I read that Job "broke the fangs of the wicked and snatched the victims from their teeth," it makes me think of International Justice Mission. Their mission is to protect people in poverty from violence. They work to combat trafficking and slavery, violence against women and children, and police abuse of power. They break the fangs of the wicked by strengthening justice systems and bringing criminals to justice. They also rescue and restore victims.

⁵ Chris Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, 256-7

⁶ Job 29:14-17

Justice then, according to the Bible is *mishpat*, rectifying justice leading to *sedaqah*, right relationships. It includes giving people their due, putting things right, a special concern for the poor and generosity towards and advocacy for the vulnerable.

Knowing the God of Justice

To return to where we began, the prophet Jeremiah makes a point similar to Micah. He says this about king Josiah.

He did what was right and just,
 ... He defended the cause of the poor and needy, ...
 Is that not what it means to know me?"
 declares the Lord.⁷

Jeremiah's point is this: doing what is just and right are intrinsic to knowing God. You cannot claim to know God and not care for the poor. Why? Because God himself is a God who embodies *mishpat and sedaqah*. He is the God of justice and righteousness.

For example, listen again to Psalm 146

7 [The LORD] upholds the cause/*mishpat* of the oppressed
 and gives food to the hungry.
 The LORD sets prisoners free,
 8 the LORD gives sight to the blind,
 the LORD lifts up those who are bowed down,
 the LORD loves the righteous.
 9 The LORD watches over the alien
 and sustains the fatherless and the widow,
 but he frustrates the ways of the wicked.

In the end the Bible commands us to do what is just and right because God is a God of justice and righteousness. Biblical ethics flow from the character of God. Because God is concerned about justice and especially for the poor and the vulnerable, so we too should seek justice, and especially for the poor and the vulnerable.

What does that mean for us, and especially when we fail? And where does Jesus fit in this picture? You'll have to come back next week.

⁷ Jeremiah 22:15-16