

JUSTICE AND RIGHTEOUSNESS

What is justice?

The dictionary defines it as “moral equity or fairness.”

I think when we hear the word “justice” most of us think of fairness.

We say, “He deserved to win,” meaning that it was only fair that he should win,” or we say, “He got his just desserts,” meaning that he got what was coming to him.

We think it important that our society should be a just society, which is why we hold one-third of our federal government, the judicial branch, responsible for ensuring that the laws that we pass are just and that they are applied fairly.

We all want justice to prevail.

The problem is, we don't always agree about what IS just.

Whether or not something appears to be just to us depends to a certain extent upon our perspective.

Was it just to award a woman \$250,000 for spilling hot coffee in her lap?

Twelve jurors thought so—in fact they wanted to give her a lot more.

Is it just to execute a serial killer?

The largest Christian denomination in the world—the Roman Catholic Church—says that it is not, that all life is sacred and the government has no just cause for taking anyone's life.

What about the concept of a “just war?”

There's a lot of debate about that.

To bring it down to a personal level, I have yet to hear of someone who lost his case in court referring to the decision as “just.”

The truth is, most of us consider justice to have been done when things turn out the way WE think they should.

So unless your name is “God,” the likelihood that your judgment is unbiased is extremely small.

And that brings us back to our original question: What is justice?

In our *Old Testament* lesson for today, the prophet Amos has something to say about justice—or, rather, a lack of justice.

The Israelites, he says, have *“turned justice into bitterness and cast righteousness to the ground.”*

They have *“oppressed the righteous and taken bribes and deprived the poor of justice in the courts.”*

As a result, God will no longer accept their worship.

He urges them to let justice, *“...roll down like a river, and righteousness like a never-failing stream!”*

In Amos’ mind, justice and righteousness seem to be closely linked, and that like love and marriage, you can’t have one without the other.

So before we go any further, we need to define “righteousness.”

The secular definition and the Biblical definition are very different.

The dictionary defines “righteousness” as “moral uprightness” or “virtue.”

A righteous man or woman, then, according to that definition, is an honorable person, a morally upright person.

The problem is that by Biblical standards that person doesn't even exist, because *"...all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."*

Quoting the *Psalms*, Paul writes in *Romans 3*: *"There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one."*

If that sounds severe, it is no more severe than the words God Himself used to describe the moral condition of mankind in a fallen world, when He says that *"every inclination of the thoughts of man's heart is only evil all the time."*

Apart from God, none of us are righteous; we are all totally depraved and sinful.

But we don't think of ourselves that way do we?

Oh we may sin every now and then, but we're not all THAT bad.

On the other hand, if God said it, it must be true.

So why don't we believe it?

And the answer to that question is that we don't believe it because we don't *want* to believe it.

Whenever we have to choose between what we *ought* to believe and what we *want* to believe, we have a strong tendency to choose the latter.

In this case, since we would prefer not to think so harshly of ourselves, we are pretty good at finding ways to avoid doing so.

One way is to compare our sins to the sins of people who are worse than we are.

“Oh I may slip up every now and then, but at least I’m not a serial killer!”

Or we “balance” the bad things we’ve done against the good things, and—SURPRISE!—we find the good things outweigh the bad.

Our memory rushes to our aid here too—we have a wonderful way of choosing to remember the good things we’ve done for other people and forgetting the bad things.

There are moments when we *are* ruthlessly honest with ourselves: maybe after we’ve said or done something particularly mean-spirited or unkind and we’re brought face-to-face with our evil motives.

But most of the time we find ways to think better of ourselves than that.

And the fact that we live in a society that encourages self-esteem rather than self-scrutiny doesn't help.

Now, I think I know what's going through some of your minds right now: Why all this focus on sin?

Do we HAVE to talk about SIN all the time?

There goes old Misery Synod Woods again, banging on sin.

What a downer!

A parishioner once asked me which was my favorite festival service: Ash Wednesday or Good Friday.

Well, I'm not going on about sin to depress you.

Believe it or not, my goal is to bring you joy rather than sorrow, and if you'll stick with me on this, I think I can do that.

But if you had cancer and went to the doctor, would you want him to tell you that you're healthy and only need to take a few aspirin?

Of course not--you'd want to know the truth, however unpleasant it might be to hear.

Well, sin is spiritual cancer.

It grows like cancer, it spreads through your body like cancer, and it kills like cancer.

It takes strong medicine to get rid of it.

But before we're willing to go through radiation or chemotherapy, we want to be sure it's absolutely necessary—that we need it to save our life.

And that's why we need to hear and believe the truth about our sin: so that we'll take the cure that will save our life.

As long as we refuse to acknowledge the depth of our sin, we remain at the aspirin stage of spiritual medication—trying to get rid of the discomfort rather than deal with the root problem.

The root problem is that we are poor and miserable sinners who do not possess a single shred of righteousness of our own.

We are unrighteous.

But if we are unrighteous, then who are those in the Bible who are called “the righteous?”

The author of Proverbs writes: *“The Lord is far from the wicked but he hears the prayers of the righteous.”*

And, *“The light of the righteous shines brightly, but the lamp of the wicked is snuffed out.”*

And what about the Psalmist who writes: “...*the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.*”

Who ARE these righteous people?

And here is where I have some very, very good news for you—news that should bring you great joy.

In the Bible, the righteous are not those who have achieved high moral standing by keeping the Ten Commandments.

Apart from our Lord Himself, there's no like that in the Bible.

The righteous are those who have come to the conclusion that they **cannot** keep the Commandments, and who have turned to God for forgiveness and for help.

Having no righteousness of their own they plead with God to make them righteous and God willingly bestows upon them the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

Therefore in the *Old Testament*, the righteous are those who “call upon the name of the Lord” to help them.

In the *New Testament*, this “calling on the name of the Lord” is called “faith.”

And so, Paul writes, “*But now a righteousness FROM God... has been made known.... This righteousness FROM God comes to all who believe through faith in Jesus Christ.*”

Now you’ve all heard these words before and you’re undoubtedly going to hear them again, but I want to make sure you understand *exactly* what they mean ***because they’re among the most important words you’ll ever hear.***

Let me put it to you as simply as I know how:

You and I are a moral shipwreck and we can’t get our ship off the rocks.

Even if we manage to avoid breaking God’s commandments outwardly by not stealing or murdering or committing adultery, can we honestly say that we have never coveted another man’s possessions or hated someone who wronged us or lusted after someone to whom we were not married?

What’s more, we can’t change.

We can promise to clean up our act—***but we can’t do it.***

Even if we can control our outward behavior we can't clean up our imaginations.

So we have a choice to make: we can put the problem out of mind by saying something like: *"Since I can't help it I'm just going to enjoy it."*

Or we can repent of our sins and turn to God in holy despair, saying, *"I, a poor and miserable sinner, confess to you all my sins and iniquities with which I have ever offended you and justly deserved your punishment now and forever. But I am heartily sorry for them and sincerely repent of them."*

If we can bring ourselves to speak those words from our heart, *God will forgive us and He will justify us.*

The Psalmist wrote: *"When I kept silent about my sins, my body wasted away with groaning all day long....Then I acknowledged my sin and did not deny my iniquity: I said, I will confess my transgressions to the Lord and He forgave the guilt of my sin."*

One of the most spiritually healthy things a Christian can do is to ask God to show him his sins—to help him uncover the selfishness and vanity that often lurk in his motives, the spitefulness and vengefulness that sometimes lie behind his words and actions--sins that he hides even from himself.

This may sound like a degrading and depressing process, but it is NOT; on the contrary, it is a joyful and liberating experience.

As your sins become more apparent to you, all you need do is confess them to God and ask for forgiveness, ***and in the very asking, you already have it.***

God has more forgiveness than you have sin.

And that is Good News indeed.

As a person loses more and more confidence in his own righteousness, he gains more and more confidence in God's righteousness—and that is a rich supply which will never fail.

So what does this all have to do with justice?

Just this: justice is what happens when we shed our notions of what is fair and unfair, and get about the business of placing the needs of others ahead of our own needs.

In other words, justice is loving others as Christ loved us.

Justice is what happens when we forgive our enemies and do good to those who harm us.

Justice is what happens when we love one another in truth and action.

Justice happens one good deed at a time when we practice the Golden Rule.

So it falls to the lot of the redeemed—to you and me—to do what we can to create justice by pouring Christian love into a fallen world.

Isn't that exactly what Christ came to do—to love those who hated him and die for those who rejected him?

And he has called us to do the same.

When we do that—when we love those who are unloveable—we create justice in an unjust world and we shed light in the darkness.

God will supply us with a never-ending stream of His righteousness, and justice will roll out of us like a never ending stream.

Amen.

