

“Gospel Renewal & Justice/Mercy Ministries”

Isaiah 58:1-14

~ Delivered at Central Baptist Church on November 6, 2016 by Pastor Barton Priebe

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** Please open your Bibles to Isaiah 58.
- Dr. Larry Hurtado is the Emeritus Professor of New Testament Language, Literature and Theology at the University of Edinburgh. He just released a new book entitled *Destroyer of the gods*.
 - The book looks at why Christianity exploded in numbers in the first few centuries despite the fact the Roman Empire viewed it as odd, anti-social, and irrational. Hurtado shows that Christianity grew because of its distinctive beliefs in many areas including human rights, justice, and compassion for the poor.
 - Today we take it for granted that all people deserve to be treated with dignity but Hurtado demonstrates that the only reason we think this way is because we still retain the radical ideas that Christianity introduced to the world.
- For instance, the Romans regularly practiced infanticide, which refers to discarding unwanted newborn babies. Such babies died from exposure or were raised as slaves and prostitutes. The early Christians condemned this practice, picked up the babies, organized nursing mothers for them, adopted them into their families, and changed the way society thought about babies.¹
 - In the Roman era it was also a common and accepted practice to have sex with young adolescents and children. The sexual love of a man for a boy was celebrated in songs. Christians rejected this and even changed how it was referred to. Rather than using the word “paiderastes” which means “sexual lover of children” Christians created a new word to refer to it, which was “paidophthoros” which means “a destroyer/corrupter/seducer of children.”²
 - The Romans also cared very little for the poor but Christians devoted themselves to the poor. The Roman Emperor Julian, who tried to stop the progression of Christianity, wrote this astounding statement to his friends: ***“Their success lies in their charity to strangers...the impious Galileans [ie. The Christians] support both their own poor and ours as well!”***³
- In short, these early Christians brought renewal to their culture by working for justice. It is this issue of justice that I want to look at today because it is a major part of our proposed five-year vision.
 - Our proposed vision is to be a church that is **(SHOW SLIDE 2)** renewing our community through the gospel. Today I want to show you that if the gospel is really at work in our lives then we, like the early church, will be a people devoted to acting in just ways in our personal lives, our city, and the world at large.
 - From our passage today let me draw out three things about justice. First, the alarming importance of justice. Second, the full meaning of justice. And third, the motivational power to do justice.
- I also recommend two books to you. **(SHOW SLIDE 3)** The first is *Good News About Injustice* by Gary Haugen and the second is *Generous Justice* by Tim Keller. I’m borrowing from both of these this morning, particularly from Keller and a sermon he has preached on this.

THE ALARMING IMPORTANCE OF JUSTICE

- So let’s begin by talking about **(SHOW SLIDE 4)** the alarming importance of justice. I say “alarming” because this first point will be exactly that.

¹ Larry W. Hurtado, *Destroyer of the gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness In the Roman World*, (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2016), Location, 2511, Kindle.

² Ibid., Location, 2917, Kindle.

³ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1997), 83-84.

- You notice that in verse 1 God tells Isaiah to cry aloud, to not hold back, to lift up his voice like a trumpet. So if I do my job and faithfully show what this passage teaches then we should feel like a trumpet has awakened in the middle of the night.
 - Let's develop it step by step.
- First of all, this is addressed to God's people who are religiously devoted and morally upright.
 - Look at how religiously devoted they are in verse 2. They *"seek [God] daily."* They don't just show up to church one or two Sundays a month. They are dedicated to prayer and worship.
 - Look at the end of verse 2. They *"delight to draw near to God."* Look at the beginning of verse 3. They practice fasting.
 - They were also morally upright. Look at verse 2. They *"delight to know my ways"* and a little further in the verse *"they ask of me righteous judgments."* They love studying the Bible. They want to do what is right.
 - This sounds to me like a people who are on the right track.
- But secondly notice they are confused because God is not responding to them. Look at verse 3. **READ 3a** - *Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?*
 - They are saying, *"God, we read our Bibles, we believe the right things, we pray, we fast, we seek you, we are committed in our church attendance – so why do you not seem to pay attention?"*
- God says he is not listening to them because of their sin. If you look back at verse 1 God says that Isaiah is to *"declare to my people their transgression, to the house of Jacob their sins."* What is this sin that God is so upset about?
 - Answer: they do not care about justice. They believe the right things and are very devout but it makes do difference to how they relate to the poor and oppressed.
 - God rejects their fasting and then he tells them what kind of fasting he wants. Look at verse 6. **READ 6** – *Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?*
- This is very alarming. This text declares that **(SHOW SLIDE 5)** if you claim to be in a relationship with God but are not actively caring for the poor, needy, and oppressed, then you are not pleasing God no matter how devout and moral you are.
 - Is that not what the text says? These people strive to be devoted and moral but God says they have sinned in not caring about the poor, the underprivileged, and oppressed.
- It is the same thing in Isaiah 1. God says he literally hates his people worship and sacrifices. He says he will not listen to their prayers. Their worship is offensive to God because it does not lead them to actively seek the well being of the weak.
 - So God says in Isaiah 1:17, *"learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause."*
- God identifies himself with the poor. When people introduce me they identify me as the husband of Heather or the pastor of Central Baptist Church.
 - When God introduces himself in Psalm 68 he identifies himself as *"Father of the fatherless and protector of widows."*
 - This is why Proverbs 14:31 says, *"Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker, but he who is generous to the needy honors him."* Or Proverbs 19:17: *"Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the LORD."*
- Over and over again the Bible says that if you claim to be in a relationship with God but are not actively caring for the poor, needy, and oppressed then you are not pleasing God no matter how devoted and moral you are.

- Think of the Pharisees. They were extremely devoted to God. Jesus says they did not just tithe on their money; they even tithed on the herbs from their gardens like mint and dill.
 - But Jesus blasts them saying they *“have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness.”*
- Or listen to 1 John 3:17-18 says, *“But if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.”*
- All of this is very alarming, particularly to conservative Christians. I think there are two reasons for this. **(SHOW SLIDE 6)** First, conservative Christians typically view caring for the poor and doing justice as optional. If you are called to it then great but not every Christian has to do this. What really matters in most conservative churches is loving God and fulfilling the Great Commission to *“make disciples of all nations.”*
 - Alright, but let me ask you, *“How do we make disciples?”* Jesus defines it in two ways in the Great Commission. First, we are to baptize those who profess faith in Jesus. And then second, we are to teach them to obey everything Jesus commanded. And Jesus commanded us to love God and to love our neighbour. So making disciples means teaching people to obey the command to love their neighbour. But what does it mean to love your neighbour?
 - Jesus defined this in the parable of the Good Samaritan. To love your neighbour means that you come to the aid of those who are oppressed and cannot help themselves (for the good Samaritan helped the man who was robbed, beaten, and left for dead).
 - To love your neighbour means to come to the aid of those who have a different ethnic background than you and have religious convictions that are even opposed to yours (for this was a Samaritan helping a Jew).
 - To love your neighbour means that you get your hands dirty in helping the oppressed, you use your time, your money, and your energy to do something about their needs (for the Samaritan bandaged the beaten man, adjusted his schedule to take him to an Inn, stayed the night with him, and paid for all of his expenses).
 - Furthermore, this parable, like Isaiah 58, blasts conservative religious people who think they can love God and pursue personal piety but walk past those lying on the side of the road.
 - So if we are really about making disciples then we must be teaching people to obey Jesus’ command to love one’s neighbour by coming to the aid of those who are vulnerable, weak, or oppressed.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 7)** The second reason conservative Christians find this alarming is because social action is typically what liberal churches do. Throughout the 20th century liberal churches rejected things like the authority of the Bible, miracles, and the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Since they also rejected the idea and practice of evangelism they gave themselves to social action.
 - In response men like Carl F.H. Henry and others fought to retain the authority of the Bible and the need for evangelism. However, an unfortunate result was that evangelical Christians grew suspicious of any emphasis on social action because they saw it as leading to liberalism.
 - And yet, historically speaking, the church has never divided the gospel message from social action. Listen to Carl Henry himself talk about how both are required: **(SHOW SLIDE 8)** *“If the church preaches only divine forgiveness and does not affirm justice, she implies that God treats immorality and sin lightly. If the church proclaims only justice, we shall all die in unforgiven sin and without the spirit’s empowerment for righteousness. We should be equally troubled that we lag in championing justice and in fulfilling our evangelistic mandate.”*⁴

⁴ Carl F.H. Henry, “A Summons to Justice,” *Christianity Today*, July 20, 1992, 40.

- So let me restate the point: if you claim to be in a relationship with God but are not actively caring for the poor, needy, and oppressed, then you are not pleasing God no matter how devoted and moral you are.
 - Is this not a trumpet blast within the sleeping crowds of conservative Christians? Does this alarm you? It alarms me.

THE BROAD MEANING OF JUSTICE

- Let's turn to the second part of the message. If doing justice is so important then we need to know what justice is. So in the second place, let's talk now about **(SHOW SLIDE 9)** the broad meaning of justice.
 - Our passage shows us that doing justice means at least three things.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 10)** First, justice means equal treatment for all people.
 - This may seem obvious to you but it has never been obvious in the history of the world. Historically, the strong destroy the weak. Men oppress women. One ethnic group seeks to wipe out another. The rich oppress the poor.
 - But the Bible teaches that all people are made in God's image and therefore all people deserve to be treated with dignity. Look at verse 7. **READ 7 - *Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him.***
 - The "homeless poor" is a word for an immigrant or a refugee. God's people are not just to look out for their own but when they see refugees they are to respond to the need. What a joy it was to be part of this church last year when we raised the funds to sponsor our family from Sudan. Well done Central! This is acting justly.
 - So justice means seeking equal treatment.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 11)** Second, justice means special concern for vulnerable populations.
 - The Bible speaks a lot about caring for the widows and orphans. Why speak up for women, for widows, or for orphans? Why not speak for men or for children with parents? That's not equal treatment. That's special treatment. The answer is because women, orphans, and the destitute often have no power to speak for themselves.
 - This is why Proverbs 31 says, "***Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute.***"
 - Look at verse 8. **READ 8 - *to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?*** **(SHOW SLIDE 12)** A yoke is a wooden beam strapped to the neck of animal to keep it in place. God says wicked people put yokes around the necks of others. Wherever people are treated like animals, God's people are to work to undo the straps of those yokes so they are free. But more than that they are to work hard to break every yoke – to break every way in which cultures, social structures, and wicked people hinder human freedom.
 - International Justice Mission (IJM) is an excellent example of an agency you can partner with. They rescue victims of slavery, trafficking, sexual exploitation and other forms of violent oppression. They tell of a 14 year old girl whom they call Panida. She accepted a job in the city to help provide for her family. But it was a trap – the person who offered her the job sold her to a brothel. IJM worked with local authorities to gather evidence, which prompted a raid on the brothel. Panida was rescued along with 95 other sex trafficking victims.
 - Justice means special concern for vulnerable populations. And there are many such as the 170 million orphans, abusive child labour, child pornography, violence against a person because of their ethnicity,
- **(SHOW SLIDE 13)** Finally, justice means a life of generosity.
 - Verse 7 shows this generosity: "***Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself***"

*from your own flesh?” Verse 10 is even clearer. **READ 10** – “pour yourself out for the hungry” and “satisfy the desire of the afflicted.”*

- This clearly involves using your wealth but it is about far more than that. It is about your time. To not hide from your own flesh means not avoiding the needs of your family, like caring for aging parents. To pour yourself out means justice is a major part of your life, not just an optional thing.
- Justice, therefore, means equal treatment for all people, special concern for vulnerable populations, and a life of generosity that seeks the well being of others.
 - Alright, who’s feeling a little overwhelmed? We’ve had a trumpet awaken us from sleep. We’ve been told what to do. But we cannot stop here because we all know that we should be generous and should care about justice but the problem is that we don’t do what we know we should do.
 - This is why we must add our third point.

THE MOTIVATIONAL POWER TO DO JUSTICE

- **(SHOW SLIDE 14)** In the third place, let’s talk about the motivational power to do justice.
 - This passage shows what will *not* make you act more justly and what will.
 - What will *not* motivate God’s people to act more justly is simply telling them it is one more duty they must fulfill. These people were very devout in their religious duties. They even fasted. Duty motivates to a point but it does not last.
 - The Bible seeks to motivate, not just through duty but also through delight. Delight does what duty cannot because our hearts are easily motivated to act on that which we find beautiful and delight in.
 - For instance, you won’t love Mozart’s music if you are just told to love it. But if you discover its beauty your heart will delight in it and you will joyfully spend great sums of money and time to listen to Mozart. You won’t love sports by being told to love it. But if your heart is captivated by it then you will gladly give time and money to it.
 - It’s the same with pouring yourself out in causes of justice. If it is just a duty you will do the minimum you can and give a few dollars to ease your conscience. But if you find justice to be beautiful your heart will delight in it and you will gladly pursue it.
 - Here in Isaiah 58 God seeks to motivate his people through delight. Over and over God puts pictures of beauty before them.
 - In verse 8 he says that if they do this ***“Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry, and he will say, ‘Here I am.’***
 - If they start acting justly then God says in verse 11. ***READ 11 - the LORD will guide you continually and satisfy your desire in scorched places and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail.***
 - Or at the end of verse 12, ***“you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to dwell in.”*** And if God’s people act justly God says in verse 14, ***“then you shall take delight in the LORD, and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth.”***
 - These are powerful pictures of beauty and delight but the New Testament gives us a far more beautiful picture of justice.
 - In the New Testament God himself became poor. The Son of God left the riches of heaven to become a man. He was born in a manger. He had lower class parents who could only afford the smallest offering at the temple. Jesus later said he had no place to lay his head. He had to borrow a donkey to enter Jerusalem and celebrated the Passover in a borrowed room.
 - More than that, Jesus knew what it meant to face injustice. His trial was a complete miscarriage of justice. He was falsely accused. He was tortured. He was oppressed by those in power. Jesus, the innocent, was brutally murdered.

- But the story of the Bible is that Jesus was condemned so that you and I can go free. Through his death and resurrection he loosed the bonds of sin, he unstrapped us from the yoke of condemnation, and he broke the yoke of sin and death.
 - You see the God of Christianity is not one who stands afar while injustice occurs. Christianity is the only religion in the world that speaks of a God who knows what it means to face injustice.
 - And the message of Christianity is that Jesus came to make the wrongs right. One day Jesus is returning to bring justice on the earth.
- Do you see it then? When this good news captures your heart it changes you into a person who delights to pour yourself out in acts of justice.
 - This is exactly why Heather and I decided to adopt our son Josh from Kunming, China. We had never considered adoption and had three biological children. One day I was out for a run and I was listening to a sermon on God's adoption of sinners through Christ. The preacher emphasized the great love of God the Father in seeking us out, the great cost in giving his Son to adopt us, and the Father's present love for his children.
 - I was completely overwhelmed by the Father's personal and particular love in adopting me. I had to stop running and just praise him. As I considered all of this I immediately saw the connections between God's adoption of sinners through Christ and adopting children.
- You see, what compelled Heather and I to act was not just a sense of duty. It was delight. Delight in what God has done in adopting us that became delight in pouring out our lives for a child in need.
 - John Newton, the author of the famous hymn *Amazing grace* wrote thousands of other hymns. In one of them he captures what we are talking about here: **(SHOW SLIDE 15)**
 - *Our pleasure and our duty,
Though opposite before,
Since we have seen His beauty
Are joined to part no more.*
 - *To see the law by Christ fulfilled
And hear His pard'ning voice,
Transforms a slave into a child,
And duty into choice.*
- So there you have it. There are many ways you can fulfill the call of Isaiah 58. It begins with acting justly in everyday areas of life like being a just employee or employer. It extends to involving yourself in the world.
 - One of the great problems I have discovered is that there are so many needs in the world that I can get paralyzed into inaction. My suggestion is that you pray and ask God to show you one or two concrete ways to involve yourself in doing acts of justice.
 - Perhaps it is sponsoring a child through Compassion Canada or World Vision. Perhaps it is supporting International Justice Mission. Perhaps it is joining our Breakfast Club ministry to the homeless poor of Victoria or the many outreach ministries we do here. Perhaps it is speaking for the unborn, assisting the handicapped, or confronting racism.
- May we be a people who are so captivated by the beauty of all that God has done for us in Jesus, that we devote ourselves to causes of justice.