

JUSTICE IN THE BURBS

How Do We Live Lives of Justice?

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Matthew 22:34-40

34 When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, 35 and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. 36 'Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?' 37 He said to him, ' "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." 38 This is the greatest and first commandment. 39 And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." 40 On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.'

This morning we are concluding our "Justice in the 'Burbs" sermon series. For the last three weeks we have been talking about what it means for us as people of faith to live lives of Justice, to be the hands of Jesus wherever we find ourselves in life. As we began the series Steve challenged us to redefine what we mean by Justice and to broaden our understanding of the word to mean living right in our relationships, our relationships with others and our relationships with God.

Two weeks ago now we wrestled with the question, why should I care? As we addressed that question, I talked us through some of the reasons that we are to engage ourselves in work for justice. First and foremost we talked about the need to live right in our relationships with others because it is who God calls us to be. Then we talked about the ways in which living lives of justice can help change and transform our lives, our churches, our communities, and even the future.

Last week then Steve addressed the reality of our defenses and excuses that keep us from engaging in works of justice. He talked about the walls that we all build to keep ourselves protected and isolated from the injustices that exist in the world. As he talked

us through these walls, Steve challenged us to begin bringing them down so that God's love and justice could flow freely in our lives.

And so this morning as we wrap up our time discussing God's justice in our lives, we are faced with one final question, one that is equally as important as the others that we've addressed in these last weeks. How do we live lives of justice?

The scripture passage that I've selected to guide our time together this morning comes from the gospel of Matthew. It is a passage that is often referred to as the Greatest Commandment. The Pharisees have just watched Jesus silence the Sadducees as he answers a question about resurrection and so they set in to stump him with questions of their own. Matthew 22:34-40 reads,

34 When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, ³⁵ and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶ 'Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?' ³⁷ He said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." ³⁸ This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." ⁴⁰ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.'

These words sum up well the idea that justice is about being in right relationship with God and with others. Religious leaders of the day, trying to trap Jesus, ask him what the most important commandment is and he responds by saying that we are to love God with all of our heart and soul and mind, but he does not stop there. Jesus further emphasizes that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves. In these few simple verses Jesus makes it quite clear, we are to love God with everything that we have and everything that we are and we are to love our neighbors as if they were ourselves. As people of faith, this text offers us a call, to follow the core of Jesus' teaching and example, by loving God and loving our neighbors.

Again, as we talk about living lives of justice, it is important to keep in mind what we mean when we use the word justice – to be living right in our relationships. Some of this includes things that play out on a large global scale and we'll talk a little bit about that in awhile. However, some of what it means to live right in our relationships – to live justly, literally starts at home. And this is where we'll begin today's practical discussion of how we live lives of justice.

Living justly begins in our homes and with our families. I'm reminded of the words of Joshua, "choose this day whom you will serve... but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." Serving God with all of our heart and mind and strength and loving our neighbors as ourselves begins with how we treat one another in our own families and at home.

On the most basic level we are called to live lives of justice as we interact with our families on a day to day basis. As we think about this basic call, we can ask ourselves some tough questions – are we gracious toward our loved ones, forgiving of our loved ones, and do we challenge our loved ones to grow? Are we treating our parents or our children or our siblings as we ourselves want to be treated? If we're not, there is no better place to begin making changes in our lives to live more justly, than at home.

On a deeper level, the way in which we serve God in our homes has to do with how we use resources and consume. In my opinion, there is no greater injustice in the suburbs of the United States than the way in which we use and waste resources. When we look at some of the numbers it is astonishing. From 1900 – 1989 the population of the United States tripled and our use of raw materials increased 17 times. While we have less than one fifth of the world's population, we in the United States use one-third of the

world's paper, a quarter of the world's oil, 23 percent of the coal, 27 percent of the aluminum, and 19 percent of the copper. Our per capita use of energy, metals, minerals, forest products, fish, grains, meat, and even fresh water dwarfs that of people living in the developing world.

As we seek to live more justly there are simple steps that we can take to cut down on the amount of resources we consume. One of the simple things proposed in Justice in the Burbs is that we find ways to drive more responsibly. We can do this by taking fewer trips, to bike when possible, to stick to the closest grocery store or pharmacy, and to drive vehicles that are more fuel efficient.

In addition to doing so through our driving habits, we can also cut down on our consumption by making different choices with our food. If we eat food that is grown locally in season it doesn't have to travel to get to our grocery store shelves. Those strawberries that we can buy in the store year-round have to travel from somewhere and that transportation has to cost something.

Additionally, our consumption can also be reduced if we make moderate adjustments to our thermostats, keeping them just a little bit warmer in the summer and just a little bit cooler in the winter. Finally, our consumption can be decreased if we become more careful about how we use water. Turning water off while we shave, brush our teeth, and wash our hands can make a big difference.

When we first begin to make some of these changes in our routines it will be challenging, it will feel like work, it will be frustrating. However, when we think about when we're traveling where and why, when we take the time to bike or walk somewhere, when we think about where our food has come from and make choices to eat locally, or

when we simply think about the water that we use, we can become more in tune with the world around us, we can become more connected to the rest of creation, to God, and to the people who live around us. When we begin living more for the sake of God's justice than for our own convenience and comfort, we can be richly blessed.

In addition to living justly in our relationships within and through our homes, we have the opportunity to live out lives of justice with our neighbors and in our communities. This is illustrated for me profoundly in the theme of hospitality that plays out through Abraham's story in the book of Genesis. When Abraham and Sarah extend hospitality to strangers, when they offer food and drink and shelter, they unknowingly extend hospitality to angels. We too have the opportunity to do this as we extend hospitality and seek to live justly with those around us.

Again, a big part of this is relational. How do we live and interact with the people next door to and down the street from us? Do we know our neighbors' names? Have we made ourselves accessible to them through the simple acts of lending hedge trimmers or a cup of sugar? I know that I haven't done a good job of this; I pull into the garage, go into the house and go about my routine. I know the names of the people who live immediately north and immediately south of us, but don't know many others in my neighborhood. Unfortunately, when we allow ourselves to be so isolated and disconnected from one another, we lose a sense of community. One of the simplest ways for us to live more justly in our communities is to be good neighbors, to get to know and to be in right relationships with those who live around us.

Outside of simply being good and friendly neighbors, issues of justice within our neighborhood and communities are also more systemic. Many kids are left unsupervised

after school and don't have good adult supervision and role modeling in their lives. Many kids struggle academically and could benefit not just from tutoring, but from relationships with adults who care about them. Again, there are some tough questions we can ask - are there safe places for kids to play in our neighborhoods? To study? To simply be? What about in the neighborhoods that neighbor our community?

In their book, *Justice in the 'Burbs*, Will & Lisa Samson point out that kids are busy with, on average, 15 hours a week of extra-curricular activities and parents are busy with transporting them around. Additionally, they point out that parents work more and more to provide their families with the stuff that they perceive they need. What if, the Samson's challenge, we would take just 20 percent of the time we spend shuttling kids around to extra-curricular activities each week and invested that in the lives of kids in our immediate neighborhoods. What impact could something like this have on the lives of these kids and ultimately on the neighborhoods themselves?

A great illustration of this comes from a story told in *Justice in the Burbs*. One Halloween a family decided that they wanted to be intentional about getting to know their neighbors. Instead of dressing their kids up and taking them out for Halloween, the family decided to throw a Halloween party for their neighborhood. They invited all of the kids and families in their neighborhood to come over for a chili dinner and some Halloween treats. This simple act of hospitality opened doors that strengthened ties in the neighborhood. It served as the starting point for further conversation and cooperation about how people could work together to care for the kids in their community and the community as a whole.

Finally, some of what we have the opportunity to do when it comes to living justly in Suburbia pertains more to justice in a large and global sense. I am reminded of the Psalmist's words in Psalm 24:1 – the earth is the Lord's and all that is in it. It is not enough for us to be worried about justice in our homes and our neighborhoods, ultimately we must be concerned about issues of justice, of living in right relationship, on a global scale as well.

Again, one of the major ways that we can do this is by changing our patterns of consumption. To begin with, we can consume less by simply buying and owning less stuff or by buying things second hand whenever possible. Additionally, as Steve talked about last week, we can make decisions to buy things that are fairly traded. Options exist today not just for coffee and chocolate, but also for clothing, furniture, cookware, and more.

When we know about the way in which specific injustices are fostered by decisions we make we can alter these as well. Some of you might remember the boycott of Taco Bell from about four or five years ago now. The workers who picked tomatoes for Taco Bell were barely being paid for their work and their toil. These workers, located primarily in Florida, were able to organize and finally a boycott was put together. The National Council of Churches and the United Methodist Church both signed on to this boycott, encouraging people not to purchase Taco Bell until the company helped negotiate a fair contract for their tomato pickers. It might not seem like a big deal, but eventually a fair contract was negotiated and thanks to the men and women who made intentional decisions about their spending, many men and women were able to earn more of a living wage picking tomatoes.

The decisions we make when we purchase effect people all around the world. The products that we choose to buy are all produced by people, people who have families and needs that would require a fair wage be earned for their work. Decisions we make in our day to day lives effect the livelihoods of men, women, and children who we will never meet.

I often times suffer from a condition that I picked up from my dad that my mom calls paralysis by analysis. When it comes to making big decisions about life I have a tendency to run all of the data, to look at it from every possible angle, to ask questions, and then more questions, and then even more questions. When I do this I have the tendency to get stuck and to not even know where to turn or what to do next. I think this is a common problem that we can experience when we begin to think about issues like justice and ways in which we could make changes in our lives.

I know I've dumped a lot of information out there and talked about lots of options for living more justly in our homes, in our communities, and globally. Please hear me clearly when I say, it's not realistic that any of us would leave here today and change our lives so radically as to implement all of these changes. To even attempt to do so would likely be catastrophic!

But somewhere between being frozen and doing nothing and trying to change everything about our lives as we leave worship today, there is a middle ground to which I think God is calling us. We can begin to and can continually make small adjustments to the lives we're living for the sake of impacting the world, for the sake of living in right relationship with others around us, for the sake of living lives of justice.

I know that it won't be easy, as we talked about last week, our natural response is to put up walls and to make excuses. However, I am often reminded of the words of Jesus in the gospel of Luke, "to whom much is given, much is required." And I have every confidence that as God continues to open our eyes to injustice in the world, as God continues to call us to live lives of justice, that God will be filling our hearts with love and inspiring us to share that love with others.

By the world's standards we are all incredibly wealthy, and we have so much to offer that can make radical impacts in the lives of others around us. Let us live lives of Justice so that all the world might truly know the goodness of God through our actions and our lives.