

Justice in the Burbs  
What Do We Mean By Justice  
Amos 5:21-24  
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Steven M Conger

(Amos 5:21-24 NRSV) I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. {22} Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. {23} Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. {24} But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

There are certain words in the Christian lingo that are hard for many people to fully grasp their meaning. Words like:

Justification  
Sanctification  
Redemption  
Salvation  
Grace

Most of you can come up with a working definition of those words, but to understand the full context of them is very difficult. Others of you have heard Jeff and I throw out words like those and when you hear us use them, you say — “Now, what does that mean?”

Another word that seems to fit into that same category is JUSTICE?

There is a great line in the, silly fairy tale movie, *The Princess Bride*. Throughout the film, the villain — Vizzini, repeatedly uses the word inconceivable in situations that are clearly conceivable. Finally, after doing it for the umpteenth time, his trusty sidekick Inigo Montoya turns to him and says in what has to be one of the greatest lines in the film:

“You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means.”

My hunch is we all have some level of understanding about this word . . .

We keep on using the word Justice, but my guess is that often it does not mean what we think that it means.

Justice, that’s easy, it is what is supposed to happen after someone commits a

crime.

(Leviticus 24:19-20 NRSV) Anyone who maims another shall suffer the same injury in return: {20} fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; the injury inflicted is the injury to be suffered.

But is that really all that JUSTICE means?

For some reason, Christianity in North America has taken a slant that says that religion is all about **you** — your personal relationship with Jesus — your personal sins forgiven by Jesus — your salvation assured by Jesus.

We say things like: “God cares for you personally and wants you to spend eternity in heaven with him.”

Because we have turned Christianity into a **personal religion**, we fail to always see the corporate nature of our faith. We think that it is all about us!

But I think the biggest challenge facing Christianity today is we need to stop looking at Christianity as my personal relationship with God, and instead begin to recognize that Christianity is about our communal relationship with God.

Go to almost any church this morning and the message that you will hear will be one of personal salvation.

Does the God people have gathered to worship care for those who find themselves in need?

Does the God preached about from the pulpit care about the poor and marginalized?

Do we talk about how we make and spend our money?

Do we talk about how we are to be stewards with the resources that we have been entrusted?

Probably not!

The truth is — we need a new view of God!

So what is Justice?

Brian McLaren wrote in the book *Justice in the Burbs*, (by Will and Lisa Samson) which was the genesis for this sermon series.

The English language is beautiful, but we have a peculiar problem in English. In Spanish, French, Italian, and most other human languages, the New Testament word *dikaiois* is always translated “justice,” a sturdy

and social word that evokes fairness, integrity, right treatment, and equity in human relationships. But in English, translators often choose to translate *dikaios* as the word “righteousness.” This is unfortunate, even tragic, because many people hear the word “righteousness” and think only of personal and private “piety” or “religiosity” or “personal morality.” As important as these things are, they are not *dikaios*.

When I looked up the term justice in the dictionary I found two primary definitions.

- 1 a: the maintenance or administration of what is just especially by the impartial adjustment of conflicting claims or the assignment of merited rewards or punishments
- b: judge
- c: the administration of law; especially : the establishment or determination of rights according to the rules of law or equity
  
- 2 a: the quality of being just, impartial, or fair
- b(1): the principle or ideal of just dealing or right action
- (2): conformity to this principle or ideal : righteousness
- c: the quality of conforming to law

In other words Justice has two roads in which it can be seen.

One is the legal definition that is probably what comes to mind first of all for most of us.

Second is the idea of treating others with fairness or genuine respect.

Will and Lisa Samson define Justice this way: Acting right in our relationships —> determining how we stand in relation to others in the world.

In other words our actions and values must mirror each other.

Justice incorporates ideas such as:

- mercy
- compassion
- being fair
- living by the Golden Rule

Over the next couple of weeks Jeff and I will try to answer the why and how questions of living justly.

But before we can get there I need to share one observation.

As you may know, on Wednesday evenings I have been teaching a class that I call Wrestling with God. As I was preparing this past week, I had engaged in a conversation with a friend of mine who is the pastor of St. Andrew UMC in West Lafayette, IN.

As Tim and I were talking, Tim made the observation that too many Christians profess belief in God, yet base the profession on the words of pastors, TV shows, and magazines. He went on and noted that too few Christians base their most important relationship with our best source, the Bible.

He likened it to a person desiring to get married and wanting to find out about what makes a marriage good and watching *Desperate Housewives*. Or someone wanting to become a doctor and figuring since they watch *House* or *Scrubs* they know all that they need to know.

How can we know God, how can we know what God wants of us if we don't read the Bible — if we don't engage in an active relationship with God?

We all know parts of the Bible.

Either the parts that we like — that are beneficial to us

Or the parts that we like to beat other people up with.

But what about all the rest?

The problem is — the Bible is a darn hard book to figure out! And so most of us decide to rely on somebody else to tell us about it.

Today this is even more true than in days gone by.

People pick churches today not based on a denomination or a tradition, like my parents tended to do, instead we often choose churches based on the personality of the pastor — the worldview, or biblical worldview of the pastor.

Think about this for a second — now some of you, of course, have been here through many pastors and this may not be true for you, but ask someone who is new WHY they come back.

Because they connect with the viewpoint of the pastor

They like what we have to say

They like the agenda — the vision — that we promote

You don't go to the Family Christian Center because that is not your worldview — but for the people who are attracted to it, they are looking for a message that God wants them to be successful — that God wants them to live

in Briar Ridge — that God wants them to have lots of stuff.

Now please — don't get me wrong — I am not putting that worldview down — but it is different from mine, and yours.

One block north of us, and two blocks both north and south are other churches.

What causes someone to choose Westminster over St Paul's Episcopal?

More often than not — it is personality based  
     the personality of the congregation  
     the personality of the pastor

What this means is that it is even more important for us to work at trying to really understand and experience the God that is spoken of in the Bible.

If you are looking for personal piety — personal religion — you are not going to find that here like you might over at the Baptist Church.

The reason being — my emphasis is not on personal salvation — but rather on the corporate nature of being a member of the family of God.

You have heard me say this a million times over the years.

    You cannot be in a relationship with God all by yourself.

Relationship with God is found when we are in relationship with each other!

And if we are mostly concerned about ourselves, or our personal salvation —> we most likely not as concerned about the environment — or the poor in our community — or the inequity in our schools.

But we do care!

Not because we feel guilty into that kind of belief, but because that is a part of our worldview.

So take some time this week and see what the Bible says about justice — remember the word is often translated as righteousness.

Take a look at:

    Luke 4:16-19 — Caring for the poor and oppressed

    Leviticus 25:1-12 — Concern for the environment

    Isaiah 56:5-7 — God's love for the foreigner

    Ezekiel 16:48-50 — Condemnation for those who do not share their wealth

Jeremiah 22:13-19 — God's view of those who profit at the  
expense of the poor

The reality is — the Bible is a story of Justice.

We don't often see that because we don't pay attention to it that way.  
We avoid those passages.  
Pastor's don't preach or teach about them.

So read — look — listen —> and see what God's story has to say about  
justice.

Next week we will deal with the WHY questions.