

Seeking Justice and Reconciliation

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[0:00] I'm the oldest of three children, and as lots of siblings are wont to do, my siblings and I fought occasionally, very occasionally.

! And one of our constant refrains was, it's not fair. And so my parents, in their infinite wisdom, decided that they couldn't take it anymore.

And so they instituted the it's not fair jar. And if we said it's not fair, we had to put 25 cents in the jar. And I remember running out of money really quickly as a 10-year-old, and it was really frustrating. And then I think there was some sort of, like, noble cause where we, like, donated it to a, you know, a charity or something like that. But that did not assuage my sense of being broke, because I thought things were so unfair, apparently, in my household.

And there was also usually some sort of, like, argument involved with my siblings. So then there had to be, like, forgive, like, a kind of forced forgiveness, and, like, okay, you guys can't just be mad at each other.

[1:11] You have to make up. And I tell this story to illustrate how we often think about justice and reconciliation. I think a lot of us think about justice as fairness and equity.

And it definitely includes that, right? And then reconciliation means, you know, you're okay with things. You have a relationship again.

But what we're going to see is that God's vision of these things goes far beyond mine as a child.

And so we're going to ask three questions this morning.

What kind of justice and reconciliation do we all long for? True justice and reconciliation. And why is this impossible to achieve on our own? And what hope does Jesus offer us for achieving true justice and reconciliation?

So first, what kind of justice and reconciliation do we all long for? It's not just keeping our quarters, right? I think we can all agree that we want justice and reconciliation.

[2:17] And the biblical word for this is shalom. It's peace, wholeness, completeness, welfare, and well-being. This idea of shalom is deep and lasting.

It's not just an absence of conflict, kind of an easy piece, like we're not, you know, there's sort of a ceasefire. It's total peace and restoration of everything that has been broken and lost.

And I think we all long for this, right? We may not agree on the best way to get there, but I think we all want it. And the great news is that God wants shalom too.

And we know because it is all through the Bible. Let's look at this portion of Exodus together.

Exodus 22 is part of the book of the covenant. And this was the law that God gave Moses after his people crossed through the Red Sea to freedom.

And it might seem strange to us that one of God's top priorities was giving the law as soon as his people were safe. But we have to remember that the Israelites had been enslaved to a series of ruthless kings for 400 years.

[3:26] And so they had gone through a lot of trauma. And one of the best things you can do to help people heal from trauma and to flourish is to establish a safe space, to reassure people that they're loved, and then to create clear, predictable routines.

And God does this with the law that he gives Moses. These laws cover several categories. It's really comprehensive. The law includes the Ten Commandments, laws for protection of property, laws about the Sabbath, how to treat servants, laws about personal injuries, and much more than that. And what we read this morning is from the general category of laws governing social responsibility. And this passage is just one example of several Old Testament passages that talk about caring for the widow and the poor, the foreigner, the orphan.

We see similar language in Deuteronomy and Leviticus, throughout the Psalms. The Psalm we read this morning, we heard this. The prophets. And this list of people, foreigners, widows, and orphans, the poor, this is a biblical shorthand for marginalized and vulnerable people.

People who don't have the usual protective structures in place for health and safety. People that were at risk for unjust treatment or exploitation. So if we were to apply this to our society today, who might this apply to?

[4:52] Maybe immigrants? The elderly? Mentally and physically ill? Single parents? Foster children? The homeless? Those are just a few categories that come to mind.

And it's been said that you can tell a lot about a person or a group or a country by how they treat their most vulnerable people. And so the fact that God cares about these things tells us a lot about his character, his compassion, his mercy, and his kindness.

And if God loves something, then his people need to pay attention. If he loves the marginalized, then he expects the same for his people.

Bob Pierce, who founded World Vision and Samaritan's Purse, which are two Christian humanitarian organizations, wrote the prayer, Let my heart be broken by the things that break the heart of God.

And this is a prayer God will answer if we pray it, because he wants that for his people. But as we look at this portion of Exodus, we don't see a lot of detail about exactly how to care for the widow and the orphan.

[6:08] Is it even possible to enforce someone giving a poor person their cloak back by nightfall so they can sleep? But what we can tell is that if it doesn't happen, then the consequences are severe, right?

So God cares about this. And the reason God doesn't spell out specific consequences or how to care is that he doesn't think he needs to.

Because as commentator T. Desmond Alexander says, legislation alone cannot produce the moral standards required for God's people. God expects that the people to whom he has given so much will mirror that generosity to those around them.

Now let me be clear about something. I'm not saying that legislation and policy don't matter. Many of you have jobs that you're pouring yourselves into, trying to effect change in the private sector or through the government.

And praise God for the work that you're doing. Thank you. Like I said, good laws and good policies promote flourishing. But what I am saying is that laws and policies by themselves can't produce moral behavior.

[7:21] You can't force someone to care about something by passing a law. So how does God handle this with the Israelites? How does he entreat them to care? He asks them to remember.

He says, remember, you were foreigners in Egypt. In effect, remember that everything you have has been given to you. Remember what it was like when you were marginalized.

When you were the foreigner. When you were the one in need of mercy. And it's the same for us. Think for a minute about a group of people or a cause that you really care about.

For me, it's single parents. And why is that? It's because I was a single parent for many years. And so I know firsthand the instability and the fear and the anxiety and the loneliness that can be part of being a single parent.

And so I naturally want to help other single parents. I feel a real kinship with them. And you may have something similar in your life. Maybe you donate a lot of money to cures for cancer.

[8:33] Like for trying to find a cure for different kinds of cancer. Because you've been affected by that personally. And there are a host of other causes. And this framework seems simple.

Right? We think, okay, we've been generous. We've been cared for generously. So like in my case, as a single parent, people poured love and generosity into me and into my son.

A lot of it came through this church. So it naturally made me want to care for others. So we think that that should be how it works. Right? So God gives the law.

Generosity begets generosity. Everybody flourishes. Justice and reconciliation. Shalom. The end.

Right? That's right. Wrong. And this brings us to our next point.

Why is this so hard to achieve on our own despite all that we've been given? Well, let's back up and check in with the Israelites. How did they do? Were they loving? Were they faithful? Generous?

[9:33] Thoughtful? Did they flourish as a society? I mean, if you know anything about the Old Testament, the answer is a hard no. We can't even make it out of the book of Exodus where you start thinking, it seems like maybe the Israelites thought that God gave them the law so that they could just decide what to do.

Like what, you know, what to break. Right? Because that's kind of how they're behaving. And pretty much the rest of the Old Testament records prophets testifying to their terrible behavior. Doing the opposite of what God entreats them to do.

They're exploiting the poor. They're harming the vulnerable. They're casting out those on the margins. They're engaging in empty worship. And eventually what God warned in verse 24 came to pass.

My anger will be aroused and I will kill you with the sword. Your wives will become widows and your children fatherless. After generations of exploitation and idolatry, the people were decimated by war and they were sent into exile.

So maybe it's not such a simple framework. And what about us? I think it's probably fair to say that for those of you who saw what the sermon was about today, you might have kind of felt your heart sink.

[10:55] I mean, honestly, that's how I felt when Thomas asked me to preach it. Real talk. I was like, oh, justice and reconciliation. That'll be easy. But why do we have these reactions?

There are a lot of reasons, but I think one of the main ones is that instead of shalom, we think of justice and reconciliation as a political fix. We're worn out.

We're discouraged. We think it's something that depends on us. And it becomes another source of striving. And I think we tend to vacillate between two poles.

Either we hear a sermon like this and we're like, okay, I'm going to try harder. I'm going to bring justice. I'm going to reconcile. I'm going to do all these things. And then when that doesn't work, when trying harder doesn't work, we get paralyzed and we harden our hearts.

And speaking of hard hearts, it's an interesting thing to wear a clerical collar out in the wild. So when I'm walking around Shaw wearing my collar, people tend to have a variety of reactions.

[12:01] My favorite question I've gotten is, are you a casual nun? But it's true. And sometimes people really want to talk to you and sometimes they really don't.

It tends to be pretty polarizing. But the thing is, when people see you in a collar, they know in some way you're affiliated with the church, even if they don't know whether you're a priest or a casual nun or what.

But, and so I know that, right? And when I'm putting my collar on, I should be praying, this is the yoke of Christ.

What a joy to serve you, Lord. But I noticed a shift in myself this week as I was preparing for this sermon. And I realized, I don't want to wear my collar a lot of the time.

And it's not because I don't want to be affiliated with the church. It's because I don't feel like I have time to wear my collar. I don't want to be stopped by people that are needy.

[13:01] I don't want to have to kind of forfeit my agenda to just spend time with people, to sit down and buy somebody lunch and hear their story. It's hard.

It's hard, right? But what's really hard is my heart. God have mercy. And this is what happens when we feel the burden of bringing justice everywhere on our own, when our hearts harden.

And what about the reconciliation part of things that we think naturally follows this justice that we're trying to enact? Well, in the case of the Israelites, we would expect that after God brought justice on Pharaoh and liberated them from bondage and brought them back into a loving relationship with himself, that they would live in this reconciled relationship with God, that they would flourish, they would be reconciled with one another, that they live lives of health.

But that's not what happened, like we said. They eventually rejected God's leadership. They asked for an earthly king. And that's what led to the hardship and the war and the exile that I already mentioned.

I wonder if you can relate to this. I think we all have this tendency. Maybe we come through a long struggle. And then rather than resting in thankfulness and remembrance for what God has done, we exchange his authority for something else.

[14:29] And that ends up being destructive. And why do we do this? Well, I would argue that it's because we're trying to achieve justice and reconciliation the wrong way.

Like I said, acting like it depends on us, looking to a system or to a situation or to a person. But friends, there's good news. There actually is a person that we can look to, to enact justice and reconciliation.

There's somebody that can save us from this cycle. And that brings us to our final question. What hope does Jesus offer us for achieving justice and reconciliation?

Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians, Jesus offers us the hope of reconciliation. And we have to recognize that like the Israelites, we're people that God loves dearly, but we're infected and sick with sin. We're caught in cycles of striving. And we need to be rescued. I think a lot of us hear the parable of the Good Samaritan. You know, we've heard that parable so much.

[15:39] And again, we take that as a mandate to do more and to try harder. But that's not what Jesus is trying to say. Jesus is trying to say, hey, you're the person in the ditch who is totally helpless and is about to die if you don't get rescued.

Friends, we need a rescue before we can be the Good Samaritan. And we need to be reconciled to God. The only way to do that is through Jesus. Verses 20 and 21 of 2 Corinthians 5 say, we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God.

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, that in him we might become the righteousness of God. And this is the great irony, that the way to achieve lasting justice and reconciliation, true shalom, came through the most unjust act ever, the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

All our failings, all our good intentions, our evil intentions, our brokenness, our sin and our shame, Jesus, who was totally innocent, took it all to the cross.

And in exchange, we receive his righteousness, his love, and his power. We get true shalom. And once we're reconciled to God through Christ, we're compelled, we're controlled by the love of Christ.

[17:15] And this word, *suneko*, here translated compels, can also mean to constrain, to suffer, to command. So what Paul is saying here is that this love of Christ is the controlling force in our lives once we've been rescued by Christ.

And that's incredibly freeing, because it means we can rest in his love. His love is the thing that drives us. We don't have to drive ourselves. We don't have to muster something up in our own strength.

It's like that Audrey Assad song, *In the Fields of the Lord*. In the fields of the Lord, our work is rest. He is moving in our hands and feet to bless.

And he's moving in our hands and feet because we're learning to live out of this love as new creations. And reconciliation has two parts.

Once we've been reconciled to God, he entrusts us with the ministry of reconciliation. So there's a vertical component to this, reconciliation to God through Jesus, and then there's a horizontal component, letting God work through us for reconciliation and the brokenness around us.

[18:29] And the way we do that is we act as ambassadors. And what do ambassadors do? This is D.C. We've got a lot of ambassadors around here. Well, ambassadors live in a foreign country that's not their home.

And they represent the interests of their home country. And they speak on behalf of the government that they're serving. And it seems like a big deal to be an ambassador, and it is.

But it's also incredibly freeing because you have the full support of your sending government.

You're not out on your own. And friends, in that, in our case, the sending government is the kingdom of the Prince of Peace and the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords.

Praise God. And he will faithfully bring forth justice because we've been reconciled to him. So Jesus flips the script.

He reverses the order we talked about at the beginning. Instead of needing justice so we can reconcile, he reconciles us to himself so that he can bring justice through us.

[19:34] And that justice may not come in the time or in the way that we think it will. But it will come. He will faithfully bring forth justice.

And there's more good news. You're not doing this alone. You're working as an ambassador alongside lots of other ambassadors as part of a community.

And we all have different gifts. And that can meet different needs as they come up. So instead of that sinking feeling of guilt, that discouraging question of how will I ever be able to meet all these overwhelming needs, the new question becomes, as Christ's ambassadors compelled by his love,

how is our community invited to help bring shalom in this neighborhood, in this city, and in the world?

And by way of application this morning, we're going to do something a little different. We're going to take some time to consider three questions with the Lord. And I'll be using the word invitation in these questions because God may not be asking you to do anything.

Maybe he's inviting you to rest. Remember, in the fields of the Lord, our work is rest. Maybe he's inviting you to a deeper awareness of something. Maybe he's inviting you to action.

[21:08] But we'll take about five minutes to do this now. And then let's continue to consider these questions in the days and weeks to come as we pray and think about what it looks like to live out our shared mission as God's community, the Church of the Advent here in Shaw.

So first, what is the Lord inviting you to as an individual? Secondly, what is the Lord inviting us to in small groups we're a part of? Our core groups, our families, maybe our friend group?

And lastly, how is our church community invited to minister in this neighborhood, in this city, and in the world? So we'll take a few minutes now and then I'll come up and close with some prayer.

I invite you to pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[22:17] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

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Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

[24:31] Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

[27:01] Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.