

Worship God, Do Justice

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[0 : 00] To be honest, I am exhausted right now. And I say that because I know that at least some of you probably feel like I do.

Trying to navigate all of the complexities of a global coronavirus pandemic and then being immersed in all of the grief and the pain and the anger of ongoing racial injustice in our country, which is a very different kind of virus.

It's utterly exhausting. And the people, the other pastors that I've talked to from around the city, I think many people are feeling the same way. And one of the things about being exhausted and feeling overwhelmed is that it can easily bring out the worst in us.

And I've experienced that in my own heart over the past couple of weeks. And I think you see this most clearly online. I mean, there's so much hate and vitriol that is being flung around on the Internet right now.

And so that's one side of this. But there's also an opportunity here. There's an opportunity in the midst of all of this for the church to be the church, for the church to be everything that God intended when he established the church in Jesus Christ.

[1 : 21] There's a tremendous opportunity. I think hearts are open in ways that they weren't before. I think people are searching and longing and hungry for the God who made them in a way that maybe they never have been before.

And so there's a tremendous opportunity here. And this is one of the main reasons why worship is so crucial. Why now more than ever, we need to make sure that worship, worshiping God is our highest priority.

And Psalm 33, which is what we're going to be looking at this morning, Psalm 33 shows us why worship is so crucial. It says it right here in verse 1. It says, Shout for joy in the Lord, O you righteous.

And these verses, they say we need to worship God with our best instruments. Get out the best instruments you have, your grand piano, and play a new song of worship to the Lord.

Why? Praise befits the upright. In other words, when we worship God, it brings out the best in us. Or another way to say it would be this.

[2 : 29] Celebrating the best in God brings out the best in us. Celebrating the best in God brings out the best in us. And so if we want to be a part of the solution, if we want to avail ourselves of this opportunity as God's people in the world, if we want to be at our best, we need to worship.

And all of that will flow out of our worship. And Psalm 33 shows us a few ways, a few specific ways, that worship brings out the best in God's people.

And I think they're particularly relevant for this cultural moment. So let's pray, and then we'll dive in. Lord, we thank you for your word. And we thank you that even as you call us to worship you above all else, you also show us why we worship you and what that worship does, not only in our world, but in us, in our own hearts.

And so we come to you with our exhaustion and our fear and our anguish. And we ask for you to minister to us through your word this morning, Lord, so that we can be all that you've called us to be in this world.

For your glory. And it's in your son's name that we pray. Amen. So the first thing that we see in Psalm 33, the first way that worship brings out the best in us, is as we worship, it enlarges our view of God.

[3 : 54] In other words, worship gives us a bigger view of God. And we see this in verses 4 through 9. And this is very important because in times like this, I think it's very easy for our view of God to get smaller and smaller and smaller.

There are countless voices clamoring for our attention right now. And it's very easy for God's word to get utterly drowned out in all of that chaos.

And the more God shrinks in our estimation and the more God's word gets drowned out, the more we lose perspective. And when you start to lose perspective, you can tell because you start feeling like things are never going to get better.

You start feeling overwhelmed by fear or dread or despair. You start feeling like the problems in our world are utterly unsolvable.

So it's not even worth trying. You start feeling like everything is spiraling out of control and there is no one ultimately in charge of all of this.

[4 : 57] And when we start to feel that way, we're losing perspective. And what Psalm 33 does is it reminds us that God's word is rock solid. God's word is rock solid.

When God speaks, it is so. God's word is what made the heavens and the earth. God's word is what created life and gave us breath. And verse 8 says, Let all the earth fear the Lord.

Let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him. Why? Verse 9, For he spoke and it came to be. He commanded and it stood firm.

Fearing God means that his word matters most. It means that his priorities matter most.

To fear God means that we most desire to please God above anyone or anything else in our lives.

Our chief motivation in life is pleasing God.

[6 : 00] That's what it means to fear the Lord. So more than making money or being successful or gaining the approval of other people or even the desire to make a difference in the world, fearing the Lord means that God's pleasure is our chief aim.

And as Proverbs 9.10 says, The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Right? So we're going to be in a much better place to make sense of our lives, to make sense of what is happening in the world right now.

We're going to be much more likely to have a godly perspective on things, to have an even keel disposition toward things, if we fear God and God alone, if his pleasure is our highest aim, if his word is our highest authority.

Worship enlarges our view of God. It gives us a bigger view of God. And in that way, it brings out the best in us.

So that's the first thing that we see in Psalm 33. But there's another way that worship brings out the best in us. And that is that it gives us a broader view of righteousness and justice.

[7 : 12] It gives us a broader view of righteousness and justice. And we see this in verse 5. Now, it's easy to skip over this verse and to move right along, but it's a very important verse.

Verse 5 says, God loves righteousness and justice. God loves righteousness and justice. Now, this little verse is extremely important.

And if you want to know more about what I'm about to say, you can read the book Generous Justice by Pastor Tim Keller. But these two words that are translated as righteousness and justice are paired together dozens of times throughout Scripture.

And in fact, they show up together a lot in the Psalms, meaning that God's people have been praying about this in their gathered worship for centuries. Now, why are they so important?

Well, justice is the Hebrew word mishpat. And mishpat means what we normally think of as justice, meaning retributive justice.

[8 : 11] This is punishing wrongdoers and caring for the victims of wrongdoing. That's the kind of more traditional understanding that most people think of when they think of justice. But the other word is very fascinating.

The other word is tzedakah. And tzedakah kind of means righteousness. Many Christians think of it as righteousness, but it can also mean justice. It can also be translated in other ways that we'll get into in just a minute.

But many Christians, when they think of righteousness, when they see righteousness in places like Psalm 33, they think primarily in terms of personal morality. So tzedakah would be being righteous, would be being sexually faithful.

It would mean telling the truth. It would mean avoiding slander. It would mean avoiding gossip and greed. It's basically being a good and upright person and living the way God wants us to live.

And, you know, that's a part of it. But it's a small part of it. And in fact, the full meaning of this word is much broader. And that's what I want to focus on here for the next couple of minutes.

[9 : 14] The Bible scholar, Alec Mateer, says that righteousness, tzedakah, means, quote, being in right relationship with God and therefore being committed to putting right all other relationships in life.

Now, that's extremely important. It means that as our relationship with God is put right, that compels us to devote our lives to putting right all other relationships around us, in society, in our lives.

So listen to Job and how Job defines a life of righteousness and justice. This is from Job chapter 29. He says, and this is the NIV version, by the way.

He says, I rescued the poor who cried for help and the fatherless who had none to assist them. The one who was dying blessed me. I made the widow's heart sing.

I put on righteousness, tzedakah, as my clothing. Justice, mishpat, was my robe and my turban. I was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame.

[10 : 21] I was a father to the needy. I took up the case of the stranger. I broke the fangs of the wicked and snatched the victims from their teeth. What I want you to notice here is that Job's definition of righteousness and justice is almost entirely social.

It's almost entirely social. It means doing all that we can to ensure that everyone around us has everything they need in order to flourish.

It means doing all that we can to make sure that all of the people around us, all the people in our society, have what they need in order to flourish. And so when you see righteousness and justice paired together like this, as we do in Psalm 33, probably the best definition of this would be social justice.

So you could reasonably translate this verse, God loves social justice. God loves social justice.

Now, there's a problem with that because even as I say that, there may be some people scratching their heads.

And the reason is that there's a huge problem with the term social justice. And that's because social justice has almost completely lost its meaning because it has been redefined over and over and over again.

[11 : 41] And, you know, that's become very clear the past couple of weeks. I've talked to a number of Christians over the past couple of weeks who earnestly want to join the fight for racial justice. They want to be in the fight.

They want to, they see this as a very important cause that Christians need to be involved in. But what I'm hearing is some people are saying, I'm not sure what version of justice I'm actually endorsing.

I'm not sure what justice means. And I feel like when I talk to different people, I hear different definitions. And that's because there are different definitions of justice. There are different visions of what a just world should look like.

And what we see is that the church is very split over the idea of social justice. There are some Christians in the church, faithful Christians, who earnestly believe that our sole focus should be personal holiness, evangelism, and discipleship.

Our primary concern should be sharing the gospel, but not social justice. Because they associate the concept of social justice with the liberal church. And they don't want to be a part of that.

[12 : 47] They see that as something that you see in the liberal side of the church, but it has no place in the conservative Orthodox church. You see other Christians on the other side of this who earnestly desire to do justice and love mercy.

They see Scripture calling us to do this, and they earnestly desire to do that. But they don't realize that some of the modern conceptions of justice have been subtly redefined.

They can sometimes reflect more Marxist thinking than they do biblical thinking. And so they no longer reflect God's heart in the way that justice is meant to.

And so in both cases, you have a very impoverished view of righteousness and justice. And Psalm 33, and many other places in Scripture like it, calls us to a broader view.

It says, on the one hand, you cannot be in right relationship with God if you are not seeking justice and caring for the fatherless and the widow and the orphan and taking up the case of the stranger and protecting the vulnerable and breaking the fangs of the wicked.

[14 : 05] That is, people who are in positions of power who are able to take advantage of or harm or enact injustice toward those who can't defend themselves. So on the one hand, it's saying we can't be in right relationship with God unless we are devoting ourselves to that kind of justice and

mercy in the world.

But on the other hand, it says you cannot seek true justice if you're not devoted to God's definition of justice, if you're not devoted to God's purposes and God's desires for human beings and his world.

So Psalm 33 puts it out here for us to see very clearly. God loves righteousness and justice, which means that we as God's people are called to love righteousness and justice.

And what that means is our core mission as Church of the Advent in D.C. should include both. It should include evangelizing and discipling every single person in this city and through this city of the world.

It should include proclaiming the gospel to everyone we can. But it should also include our pursuit of justice, doing everything we can to bring about the complete eradication of racism and racial injustice anywhere and everywhere it exists.

[15 : 30] It means we devote ourselves to both. So Psalm 33 and worshiping God brings out the best in us by giving us a bigger view of God, but then it also gives us a broader view of righteousness and justice.

The third thing that it does in us is it gives us a more balanced view of politics. And my Lord, we need that right now. In verses 10 through 17, you'll see what I'm talking about.

David Brooks recently observed that, quote, one of the great problems of the moment is that morality has been replaced by politics.

So moral conformity, our kind of conformity to some publicly agreed upon moral standard, moral conformity has been replaced by political conformity. And by that I mean conformity to the political orthodoxy of your particular tribe.

So instead of a common moral framework, we have competing political ideologies, which means everything has become a power struggle. Everything has become a power struggle.

[16 : 40] And you see this online. The internet seems to be one big shouting match. There are people on the internet trying to bully and coerce and shame other people into adopting their perspective.

There are people on the internet who are signaling their virtue and calling out and shaming their opponents. And it's been horrible to see all of this play out around the killing of George Floyd and the other people who have lost their lives in these horrible ways.

Because there are drastically different narratives out there about what happened depending on which political tribe you are listening to. There are drastically different narratives and accounts depending on which political tribe you're paying attention to.

And the reason, I think, is that more and more people look to politics to find meaning in life. More and more people look to politics to make meaning of their lives.

Andrew Sullivan wrote a piece that I think is extremely important. He wrote it back in 2018 called America's New Religion. And he basically says, what happens when Christianity is removed from society?

[17 : 48] When you take that piece out of society, what's the result? And he says, I think what happens, and this is quoting him, I think what happens is illiberal politics. The need for meaning hasn't gone away.

But without Christianity, this yearning looks to politics for satisfaction. And religious impulses, once anchored in and tamed by Christianity, find expression in various political cults.

And I think he's sitting the nail on the head. Politics is America's new religion. So what's the answer to all of this? Well, the answer is worship.

The answer is worshiping God and worshiping God in such a way that it puts politics in its place. So that means we sing the words of Psalm 33.

As God's people, we join together, we get out our instruments, and we sing verse 10. The Lord brings the counsel of the nations to nothing. He frustrates the plans of the people.

[18 : 50] Verse 16, The king is not saved by his great army. A warrior is not delivered by his great strength. Verse 17, The war horse is a false hope for salvation, and by its great might, it cannot rescue.

Politics cannot save because people cannot save ourselves. Because we cannot save ourselves. We can do a lot to alleviate suffering.

We can do a lot to create better policies and better legislation. We can do a lot to get strong administrations in place and good leaders in place. But we cannot ultimately heal the brokenness and the sin of the world.

And every system, every administration that we touch is going to be tainted by sin. It's impossible for us to build anything that's not in some way tainted by sin.

Now that's not to say that this doesn't matter. That's not to say that politics doesn't matter. Politics matters very much. We need to be out there voting. We need to be out there trying to get the best candidates possible into the positions that matter most.

[19 : 59] We need to be doing that. Christians need to be pushing for reforms that lead to a more just and equitable society for all people. We need to be as fully engaged as we can be.

And we need to be praying for our country. And we need to be praying for our leaders. Verse 12 says, Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord. Rather than assuming that our country is a blessed nation, we should be praying that our leaders seek the blessing of God and follow the Lord. We need to be praying for godly leaders who worship the Lord instead of all of the idols that do define our country's culture. Idols like power and money and consumerism.

We need to pray for godly leaders who fear the Lord above all else. We need to be praying for our country. And as we devote ourselves to justice and mercy, and as we push for reform, and as we engage politically, and as we pray for godly leaders, we need to do all of this with verse 20 in mind. Our soul waits for the Lord. He is our help and our shield. See, this is what protects us from burnout and cynicism. Right? We throw ourselves into doing all that we can here and now, but we reserve our innermost being for God.

[21 : 23] We don't put our ultimate hope in what we're able to accomplish. We put our ultimate hope in God alone because we know that only God can bring perfect justice and healing to the world.

So we do all that we can right now while it is night, but our soul is continually fixed on the horizon, waiting for the rising sun.

So Psalm 33 is giving us this picture of what worship does in us. It gives us a bigger view of God. It gives us a broader view of righteousness and justice, and it gives us a more balanced view of politics, what it is and what it never can be. And then the final point that I want to make is a brief point, but the fourth thing that worship does, and we see this in Psalm 33, is that worship shows us, it gives us a better source of hope.

A better source of hope. The good news is, we have the best reason for hope that there is, and that is God's steadfast love. The last line of the Psalm says, let your steadfast love, O Lord, be upon us even as we hope in you.

[22 : 35] And that's where all of this has to begin and end, in the steadfast love of the Lord. You know, last weekend, some of us at Church of the Advent joined together with Christians from all around the DMV area in a Christian march for racial justice and healing.

And I don't know about you, but I desperately needed that. I felt tremendously encouraged by that. And one of the pastors leading that march was Pastor Thabiti Anyabwile, who's the pastor at Anacostia River Church.

And he said something at one point during the march when we all stopped near the reflecting pool. He said something that I think is extremely important. He said, you know, ultimately, as important as these issues are and as important as racial justice is, the biggest justice issue in our world is not racial justice.

The biggest justice issue is not the issue of race, as important as that is. He said the biggest justice issue in this world is the sin that we've committed against God.

That's the biggest issue. It's the deepest issue. And every human being, every human being, before we throw ourselves into any other justice issue, we have to figure out how we're going to resolve that justice issue that exists between us and God.

[23 : 54] Because as horrible as systemic racism and white supremacy are, as much damage as they have done, they are ultimately symptoms of a deeper issue, which is the issue of sin.

The issue that human beings have turned and rebelled against God. That's the core problem in the world. That's the reason why the world is the way it is. Why our society is the way it is.

But the good news of the gospel is this. As much as God loves righteousness and justice, he also loves you. And he loves me.

He loves his people. This psalm says that the entire earth is filled with the steadfast love of the Lord. God loves every rock, every twig, every blade of grass, and every human being. And that's the good news of the gospel. And what that means is that when God saw this justice issue with us, when he realized that the relationship between God and the people that he made was seemingly irreparably broken, he did the unthinkable.

[24 : 58] He sent his son, Jesus Christ, who was perfect and innocent and holy and righteous and just. And Jesus willingly and joyfully went to the cross and sacrificed himself to pay the debt that we owe, to set us free from the debt of sin, to set us free to be adopted by God and to become his sons and daughters, to inherit all of the rights and privileges in the kingdom of God.

And because Jesus did that, it sets us free to become part of the solution rather than part of the problem. The ultimate justice issue is resolved by putting our faith in Jesus Christ, which sets us free to devote the rest of our lives to all of the other issues of injustice that I believe we are here to confront as God's people.

So if you want to be at your best right now, if you want to be part of the solution in this world, it all begins with getting right with God and then making the worship of God your highest priority. Celebrating the best in God brings out the best in us. It gives us a bigger view of God. It gives us a broader view of righteousness and justice. It gives us a more balanced view of politics and it shows us a better source of hope.

And it's in that hope that we now pray. Amen. Lord, we thank you for this hope that we have. We thank you for the truth of the gospel.

[26 : 28] And we thank you that as hopeless and overwhelmed as we may feel, that Lord, you are at work now. And we pray that we would be at the very center of what you're doing in this city.

We pray that we would have the honor of participating alongside you in the healing and the restoration of our society, Lord. And we pray this not only for our good, but we pray this that your name would be glorified above all others as the one who makes all things new.

We pray this in your son's holy name. Amen.