

# Justice and Mercy

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[0:00] Well, good morning again and welcome, especially if you're joining us for the first time. If you're not regularly a part of our church, we're delighted to have you with us and delighted to have an opportunity to tell the Christmas story together to prepare our hearts for the celebration that awaits in just a few weeks.

There's a story that I saw the other day that I've actually seen for the last two years. It seems to circulate around Christmastime. It's a story in the news about a mall Santa turned vigilante. I don't know if you've seen this story or not, but the story goes that in this mall in Milwaukee, there's this mall Santa and a little girl comes up to him and says that she wants to tell Santa a secret. And so he leans down and he says, yes, what is it? And she points to her stepfather who's in the crowd and she confesses to him the things that her stepfather has done to her, the bad things that he's done to her.

And so Santa listens to this and then he turns and he gives a look to his elves and they all go over to this stepfather and they bring a little Christmas justice to this man and they give him a beat down in this mall.

[1:11] And there's a photo with the article of Santa in handcuffs. And as people are cheering him on as a hero, and there's even a hashtag that comes with it, hashtag free Santa.

And I saw it the other day and I thought that's amazingly relevant to what we're going to be talking about at Lessons and Carols. I don't know if the story is true or not.

It's probably, who knows? But I do know that there is a strong connection. There's a very strong connection between Christmas and justice. Christmas and justice.

You've heard it all this morning in every lesson we've read. These are considered Christmas readings and yet they all have a very strong theme of justice in them, of people's desire and God's desire to put the world right.

And so we're going to look at one of these lessons more closely, the one we just heard read, Isaiah chapters 64 and 65. And the question we're going to be asking is, what does Christmas have to do with justice?

[2:17] Why is this such a central theme as we try to understand the meaning of Christmas? This passage breaks down into three sections and so we're going to look at this. In three parts.

The first part we see in verses 1 through 3, we see a cry for justice. Let me pray and then we'll dive in. Lord, we thank You this morning as we gather here around Your Word.

We thank You for Your promise to us that You're not a God who leaves us to our own devices, but You're a God who is by name, You have referred to Yourself as God with us, Emmanuel.

You're the God who has always promised and now delivered on that promise to be in the midst of Your people always. And so, Lord, we thank You that You're here with us. We ask that You would be the one to speak to us this morning through Your Word.

We ask this in Your Son's holy name. Amen. So, the first thing that we see in Isaiah 64 in verses 1 through 3 is we see this cry for justice.

[3:17] Now, as we talk about that, I want to first say this. You know, as absurd as the mall Santa vigilante story might be, I suspect it's actually not too far off from how many of us might think about God and God's justice.

I think that most of us probably think, most people probably think of God mostly like Santa Claus. God's here to help us be happy and to be fulfilled and hopefully to give us what we want when we ask, assuming that we are on the good list.

So, life is about living a good enough life to make the good list, and then hopefully God will bless us. But everybody knows that there are some exceptions. There are exceptionally evil people out there,

all of the tyrants and the racists and the child molesters, people who are exceptionally bad, and most of us think that in those cases God should probably step in and bring some justice. But other than that, God is more or less a kind of Santa Claus figure in our lives. And that's partly because the whole idea of a God who punishes sin, who hates sin, has kind of gone out of fashion in our culture.

All right, so these days it's very common to hear people say, well, you know, people used to believe in a God who was angry and had got angry at sin and judged people and all of that. People used to believe in that, but we've sort of evolved as a society.

[ 4 : 44 ] We've become a much more loving and tolerant and educated society. And so, because of that, we now believe in a God of love, and the God that we believe in now loves people and accepts them and embraces everyone just as they are.

He's a God who essentially wants to affirm us and wants to make sure that we're happy, and that's the kind of God that we prefer these days. Now, compare that to Isaiah chapter 64 verse 1.

Here's what Isaiah says, Isaiah is crying out to God for justice on behalf of his people.

His people. His people had suffered so much violence. They had suffered so much war. They had suffered oppression. They had suffered subjugation. They were being taken into exile by Assyria. Isaiah knew that after that they would again be taken into exile by Babylon. And so, he's watching his people whose entire story had been one of oppression and subjugation and bloodshed, and he's crying out to God.

[ 6 : 01 ] And he's essentially saying to God, God, why don't you do something? Why don't you do something about this evil that I see happening right in front of my face? Where are you?

Why have you not intervened? And, you know, I think that if we're totally honest, that's how we feel when we look around the world today, when we see Russia invading Ukraine, massacring civilians and looting and raping and torturing people.

I think it's how we feel when we see that there's been another school shooting, another mass killing. I think it's how we feel when we see that there are currently 82 million refugees and displaced people in the world.

And we look at these things and we say, how can God let this happen? God, why don't you do something? You know, there are a hundred different issues I could name.

Many of you in this room care deeply about and even work on trying to solve some of these issues. But we see things like this and we think, if there is a God, why doesn't He do something about this?

[ 7 : 05 ] And I think if we're honest, we all feel that. Because deep down, most of us actually want a God who cares about injustice. We want God to get angry and punish the evildoers.

And that's why the whole idea of a God who just accepts everyone and affirms us in our life choices is ultimately so empty, so vapid. Because a God who doesn't care about all of the suffering and evil in the world is not a loving God.

He's more what I would think of as a supernatural sociopath who's clearly not worthy of our worship, not worthy of our consideration.

A truly loving God who is a God that would be worthy of our worship is a God who gets angry at sin and punishes evil and brings justice for the oppressed.

Right? So, to put it another way, if you believe in a God of acceptance and love who doesn't care about sin, then with all due respect, your privilege is showing.

[ 8 : 14 ] Most people who believe in a God like that have probably never personally experienced violence. They've never suffered under subjugation or oppression. I think that's one of the reasons why this view of God is so popular among wealthy Western elites.

But if we turn our ears to the rest of the world, we will hear the voices of those enduring violence and war and poverty and oppression.

We will hear them crying out, and they sound a whole lot like Isaiah. Crying out for God to rend the heavens and shake the mountains and bring justice.

So, that's the cry for justice that we hear in Isaiah. But as we continue in the passage, we see in verses 4 through 7 that there's a serious problem that comes along with this.

Because justice, by definition, requires some kind of standard of good and evil. Right? Justice requires, by definition, the ability to distinguish between right and wrong.

[ 9 : 28 ] So, let me ask you, where do you draw the line between right and wrong? Where do you draw the line that determines who the people are who deserve judgment?

And who the people are who make the good list? Where's that line in the sand? We all draw that line differently, and chances are you're going to draw that line in a way that reflects your life, your values, your background, your assumptions, your family, your politics.

Right? So, conservatives are going to draw that line one way. Progressives are going to draw that line probably in a different place. Someone from a communal culture is going to draw it one way, and somebody from a more individualistic culture is going to draw it another way.

A secular humanist is going to draw that line one way, and a religious person is going to draw it another way. We all are going to draw that line in different places, but we all draw that line somewhere.

And here's the thing, most of us tend to assume that we're on the right side of that line. Wherever we draw it, we're like, here's those people over there, those are the bad people, here's the line, and I'm with the good people, the people like me, the normal people.

[10:41] And I think we tend to make that assumption because of the way we view ourselves relative to other people. I heard somebody say this recently, and it really resonated with me. Have you ever noticed how when you confront evil in yourself, we tend to psychologize it?

But when we confront evil in another person, we tend to demonize it. There's a fundamental difference between how we see ourselves and how we see other people. You know, at the height of the Me Too movement, there were a lot of articles coming out condemning the perpetrators and condemning the system that enables them, and rightfully so.

But in the midst of all of that, a woman named Claire Deterer wrote a piece in the Paris Review, and the piece was entitled, What Do We Do With The Art of Monstrous Men?

And the first part of the article was pretty standard. She was condemning the behavior. She was talking about the industry. And she was saying, what do we do with the art that these perpetrators have created? Should we still go to their performances and watch their movies and go to their comedy shows and all of that, or not?

Should we boycott it? So that was the kind of point of the article. But there's a place in the article where she took a really unexpected turn. She turns around to focus on us as the outraged audience.

[11:57] And you have to think, this is at peak outrage, when this is all we were talking about as a society. And so she turns the focus around, and she focuses on us as the outraged audience.

And in the article, she asks, why are we...she says, you know, here's all this stuff that we're outraged at, and rightfully so, and it's bad, but why are we as the audience so quick to pour on the outrage?

And I thought that was a very interesting question. And she says, it could be that what the audience feels in its heart is pure and righteous and true. But there might be something else going on here. When you're having a moral feeling, self-congratulation is not far behind. Right? When we call other people out for being abusers and racists or whatever we're accusing them of, we're drawing a line, and we're saying that certain things are unacceptable and evil over there, and those things deserve to be punished.

And, you know, part of that is right. It's important to call out things like that. It's good and right. But it also feels good to be calling those people out, and it feels good to be the one doing that. And by saying that someone else is on the wrong side of the line, by implication, I'm saying that I'm on the right side of the line.

[13:16] I'm distancing myself from that behavior. I'm above that. I'm better than that. How dare you do that? I would never do something like that. And it feels good. There's a form of self-congratulation that's happening there.

And, you know, for that, it really doesn't matter what your standards are. Whether you have a conservative bent or a progressive bent, whatever your ethics, wherever you draw the line, the point she's making is that there is something in us that drives us to call out those on the wrong side of the moral line so that we can congratulate ourselves for being on the right side of the moral line.

And so then we ask, okay, well, why would we want to do that? What would be the motivation for that? And here's what she says. It's a bit of a longer quote, but it's worth it to hang in there.

She says, Even in the midst of my righteous indignation, I know that on some level I'm not an entirely upstanding citizen myself. Sure, I'm attuned to my children and thoughtful with my friends. I keep a cozy house and I'm reasonably kind to my parents. In everyday deed and thought, I'm a decent enough human, but I'm something else as well.

[ 14 : 37 ] I suppose this is the human condition, the sneaking suspicion of our own badness. It lies at the heart of our fascination with people who do awful things.

Something in us, in me, chimes to that awfulness, recognizes it in myself, is horrified by that recognition, and then thrills to the drama of loudly denouncing the monster in question.

Do you understand what she's saying here? Deep down, we all have a sneaking suspicion of our own badness.

We have this deep, unadmitted fear that if anyone really knew the truth about me, they would see that I'm not the person I claim to be.

They would recognize the monster, and they would run in fear. And so, she's essentially saying this, outrage, whatever else it may be in our society, outrage can be like a moral morphine.

[ 15 : 47 ] It could be pain medicine for our own conscience. Because when I call out another person as being evil, I get a little hit. I get a little bump.

I get a brief reassurance that I must be one of the good guys, because I'm definitely not that bad guy. And for the briefest of moments, I feel a little more reassured.

But it never lasts. And that's why the outrage industrial complex grows and grows. Isaiah, on the other hand, has the courage to be honest.

He says, here's God's standard of good and evil. Here's where God draws the line in verses 4 and 5. Good people, Isaiah says, good people who live up to God's standard do two things.

Number one, they believe and trust in God in all things above all else. And two, good people are righteous, which means they consistently do right in all their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

[ 16 : 53 ] They believe and trust in God above all else, and they always do right in their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. And he recognizes, because he's honest, that God's standard is hopelessly out of reach.

It's hopelessly unattainable. And so, that's what we see in verses 5 through 7 to sort of put it in more accessible language. He says, here's the reality, God.

We sin, and that sin angers you. And then we sin more, and that sin angers you. And the truth is, we've been sinning for a very long time.

And he says, we're so unclean that even our best attempts at righteousness are like greasy, filthy rags. And then he says, what's really going on?

He says, you know, whatever we may pretend to be, no one calls on your name. No one really calls on your name. And that's really what the word sin means.

[ 17 : 51 ] It means ignoring God in the world that He made. And He says, we're all ignoring you. No one calls on your name. He's saying, essentially, you know, we get so caught up in all of our righteous indignation.

He's so angry about Assyria. He's so angry about Babylon. We're so angry about all of these things going on in the world. He says, we get so caught up in our own righteous indignation and our finger-pointing and our outrage.

We get so caught up in that that we lose sight of the truth. And here's the truth, Isaiah says. The one who is most justified in their outrage is God.

In the face of our rejection and rebellion, the one who is most justified in their outrage is God Himself. So, His realization, and the problem is this.

It doesn't matter where we draw the line. The devastating realization is that according to God's standard, we are all on the wrong side of the line. We're all on the wrong side.

[ 18 : 53 ] So, here's the turn in Isaiah. It begins with this cry for justice. God, do something about all of this evil over here. But then Isaiah realizes the problem with justice. And here's the problem in a nutshell.

If God doesn't bring justice and stop invasions and stop racism and stop poverty and stop all of these, if God doesn't bring justice, then there's no hope for the world.

He's the only one who can do it. But the problem is if God does bring justice, then there's no hope for us because nobody's going to survive it.

Nobody's going to pass through that unscathed. And so, here's Isaiah's dilemma. He realizes that even as he's calling God's judgment down on Assyria and Babylon and all of the evil, even as he's calling judgment, he's calling judgment down on himself.

And he realizes, I can't call divine judgment down on the injustice of the world without calling divine judgment down on me. So, then he cries out in verse 5, well, who then can be saved?

[ 19 : 57 ] What hope is there? And that leads us to the third point. Again, we take a turn in this passage. And we realize our only hope, our only hope is found in God's love.

Isaiah says in verse 8, But now, O Lord, and he uses God's covenant name, Yahweh, you are our Father. You're our Father. When God looks at us, He doesn't just see minions.

He doesn't just see servants who have disobeyed His orders. He sees children. He sees beings whom He has crafted with His own hands.

We're the clay, you're the potter. God sees that which He most loves in all of creation. And this is really the unanswerable dilemma that runs through the entire Old Testament.

God's love compels Him to bring judgment. God's love compels Him to bring an end to suffering and violence and injustice and to restore the world that He made.

[ 21 : 08 ] But God's love also compels Him to have mercy because we are His beloved children. So, God is compelled to bring judgment, and He's compelled to show mercy, all of it being driven by love.

And we realize that up until the very end of the Old Testament, there is no answer to this question. Love demands both judgment and mercy. And so, there's this question as we get to the end of Malachi, how can you have both judgment and mercy at the same time?

And if you stop with the Old Testament, there is no answer to that question. The answer to that question is Christmas.

It's Christmas. The prophecies of Isaiah say that one day God's going to come as a judge. He's going to bring justice for the oppressed. He's going to liberate the captives.

He's going to topple the wicked with a breath. He's going to do what He says in Isaiah 65, 17, For behold, I create a new heavens and a new earth.

[ 22 : 18 ] All of the evil stuff that we deal with now, it won't even be a memory. It will be wiped away. But before that day, God will first come as a child, born in Galilee.

And as a child, He will be like us in every single way except one. He alone will embody God's standard of righteousness.

All His life, He will believe and trust His heavenly Father above all else. All His life, He will be righteous in all His ways. And yet, this child will grow up one day not to be a judge, but rather to be judged, to take our place, which He did on the cross at Golgotha.

So, even as we celebrate this birth at Christmas, all of these events occur in the shadow of the cross, which awaits.

Christmas, God's answer to the dilemma, God's way of bringing both judgment and mercy. So, this answers the question for us, what does Christmas have to do with justice?

[ 23 : 35 ] Christmas is God's way of bringing judgment and mercy at the same time. Christmas is God's way of giving hope both to the world and to us.

The judge enters the world and allows himself to be judged instead of us. You know, earlier I mentioned the situation in Ukraine.

We are fortunate enough to have with us two professional musicians from Ukraine, Yulia and Ruslan, and they're going to, in a moment, sing a traditional Ukrainian Christmas carol, Christmas hymn.

And you have the English version in your bulletin so you can follow along as they sing. But here's the verse that really struck me as I read this carol, because this is saying exactly what we've just been saying here this morning.

The love of the Lord and God's truth, you will bring faith to the world, to your people. The truth will live on.

[ 24 : 41 ] The shackles of sin will be shattered. But my child on Golgotha, my child will die. So, I'd love to invite you all to come up and lead us, and I'll close us in prayer.

Lord, we thank you for your word, and we pray that your spirit would continue in us what your word has begun. Lord, that you would continue through word, through prayer, through song, to press these truths into us, that we might understand why you came and that it might change us.

I pray this in your Son's holy name. Amen.