

Practicing Merciful Service in a Culture of Injustice and Division

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Good morning.

My name is Brian. I'm a member of the Alameda Community Group. Today's scripture is from the Old Testament, a reading from Psalm 146.

Praise the Lord. Praise the Lord, my soul. I will praise the Lord all my life. I will sing praise to my God as long as I live.

Do not put your trust in princes, in human beings who cannot save. When their spirit departs, they return to the ground. On that very day, their plans come to nothing.

[1 : 04] Blessed are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God. He is the maker of heaven and earth, the sea and everything in them.

He remains faithful forever. He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets prisoners free.

The Lord gives sight to the blind. The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down. The Lord loves the righteous. The Lord watches over the foreigner and sustains the fatherless and the widow.

But he frustrates the ways of the wicked. The Lord reigns forever. Your God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise the Lord.

The grass withers and the flowers fall. But the word of our God stands forever. Good morning, Christ Church. Christ Church, congratulations for making it here this morning through all the barricades.

[2 : 07] And I understand we had a few Christ Church runners as well. Look forward to seeing the results later today. We've been calling this sermon series, Holy Habits of Grace.

And the driving question has been, how can we make our whole lives a grateful response to the grace of God? How can we change our daily, weekly, monthly, and seasonal habits so that less time and less attention and less energy is given to God and to his grace in our lives?

Another way to say that is, if Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, then how can we not just trust his truth, but how can we also walk in his way? How can we live his life?

And we have this handout for you today. Some of you have seen this maybe before. But the first side says, what kind of community do we want to be? And we tried there to name the dominant cultural paradigm that we're living in.

And then we also tried to sort of map out this alternative counterculture, this creative minority that we would like to be. And we try to put words to a particular spiritual practice that creates and sustains such a culture.

[3 : 34] And in doing this, we're trying to define our values, to define the way of life that we hope to embody together and the kind of things that we could be expecting to pray for each other, for example.

If you turn to the other side, the second side of that sheet, it says, you know, what kind of person do I want to be? And you can see the list of practices, the list of habits there, and the ways that those might fit into our daily, weekly, monthly, and seasonal rhythms of life.

And you can think about that like an organized trellis upon which the organic vine of your life and your life with God is meant to grow up on.

It needs structure. It needs support. And so we're encouraging you to take that today and make some notes on it. Write some things down that God has been speaking to you about, things He's been inviting you to do, things He's been challenging you to do.

As we finish up 2024 and head into 2025, what are the next steps that He's calling you to take to experience real life transformation by His grace?

[4 : 42] Notice that two of those practices at the bottom are outward facing. So it's not just about God's grace in our lives. It's also about God's grace in the lives of others.

And I think about these as kind of for the city habits that are oriented to our neighbors, to our friends, our coworkers, and our family members. One of those habits we call witness.

And two weeks ago, we encouraged you all to write down the names of three people that you'd like to see explore faith, perhaps for the first time.

And begin praying for those people. Some of you have emailed those names to us at alpha at Christchurcheastbay.org. And we have a list of people in our prayer room that we prayed over this morning.

I think the list is now at about 75 people that we're praying for that they would begin to explore their questions about faith and God and eternal matters.

[5 : 39] And we had an amazing seminar yesterday where we got some equipping and some training about how to just pray that God would lead us into more simple conversations that can become serious conversations that can become serious conversations where we can talk more about our faith.

And if you weren't there, we're going to email the link out to that video. We strongly encourage you to engage with that very helpful training. But this habit of witness or this habit of evangelism, whatever you want to call it, it must never function alone.

Right? It always needs to be paired with this other habit of service, of justice, of mercy, and compassion. Because witness has to do with gospel proclamation, but service has to do with gospel demonstration.

And Jesus, in Luke chapter 24, it says Jesus of Nazareth was powerful in word and deed before God and all the people.

And that tells us that his disciples, his church, are also called to be powerful in gospel word and gospel deed. Gospel witness and gospel service.

[6 : 51] Gospel proclamation and gospel demonstration. And so today we're going to look at this habit of service, gospel service, through the lens of Psalm 146 that you just heard read.

And I want to just engage that text with three simple questions. First of all, who deserves our trust and our praise? Secondly, how does God relate to the vulnerable?

And third, how does the gospel compel us to serve? First of all, who deserves our trust and our praise?

So this is the first of the final psalms that conclude this 150 psalm book called the Psalter. And these final psalms, they're all joy, they're all praise.

And each one of them begins and ends with praise the Lord, or in Hebrew, hallelujah. And you'll notice in line one, the psalmist is summoning other people to praise.

[7 : 59] It's implied, he's saying, praise the Lord, y'all, or praise the Lord, you guys, wherever you're from. He's saying, praise the Lord, all you people. And then in line two, he summons himself and he says, praise the Lord, my soul.

And notice what he does next. He resolves and he commits himself to a lifetime of praise. He says, I will praise. I intend to praise. I mean to praise.

I am bound and determined to praise the Lord all my life. It's a resolution that my praise is not going to rise and fall on whatever my mood happens to be or however my circumstances might be changing.

No, as long as I have breath in me, he says, I will praise God. And then he begins to contrast something. He contrasts praising the Lord and trusting in princes.

And he says this in verse three. He says, do not put your trust in princes and human beings who cannot save. When their spirit departs, they return to the ground. On that very day, their plans come to nothing.

[9 : 09] Now, we don't have many princes in our culture, but we do have a lot of powerful politicians, billionaires, intellectuals, celebrities, influencers, whose help and whose hope, whose protection and whose provision, whose policies and promises may seem at times more solid and more practical than God's.

And the psalmist would not have written this down for us if people were not as naive and as gullible as we very often can be. To put our trust, our ultimate trust, in human individuals and human systems.

And he gives us two reasons. He says, why should we not invest our trust in these people and these systems? And he says, reason number one is they don't have the power to save.

I mean, they might be able to give you a more reliable economy, more stable immigration at home, less conflict and chaos abroad.

But they cannot give you salvation. And the second thing the psalmist says is they may be very powerful financially or socially or culturally, but they're finite mortal creatures just like you and me.

[10 : 33] And all of their plans, all of their projects are going to perish with them. When they die, someone's going to put them in a box, lower them into the ground, throw dirt on them, and the news cycle and the election cycle is going to move on to the next set of mortal human beings.

So who then deserves our trust and our praise? While humans in high places can give us some help, they cannot give us basic help.

They can't give us ultimate help. So who can? Verse 5, blessed are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God.

Now, our trust and our praise is to be redirected from high-powered human beings to this one true God who is the help and the hope of sufferers and sinners.

And Jacob was one of the greatest sinners and the greatest sufferers in the first book of the Bible. If you know anything about his story, even in his mother's womb, he's grasping his brother's heel.

[11 : 39] As he comes out, you know, on day one, the rest of his life, he spends scheming and deceiving people. And yet this God of amazing grace comes to Jacob, the deceiver, and he befriends him.

By his grace, he transforms Jacob. He blesses Jacob and he gives Jacob these enormous privileges and massive responsibilities as his covenant partner.

And in the second book of the Bible, we see that this God is not only the God of Jacob, he's the God who's the help and the hope of Jacob's offspring.

Because he comes to them and he dismantles the entire empire of Egypt on their behalf. He leads the 12 tribes of Jacob, the 12 tribes of Israel, out of their captivity in Egypt and into their freedom in the promised land.

And so in light of this revelation about who the God of Jacob is, the psalmist makes this fundamental decision that rather than trust and praise ephemeral human helpers in temporary positions of power, I'm going to trust and praise the Lord.

[12 : 55] And I don't know if this is a word for some of us in this post-election season. Like who is your help and who is your hope? Verse 10 says, The Lord reigns forever.

Your God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise the Lord. Princes are going to return to the dust and the Lord is going to rule without end.

So put your trust and put your praise in him. Amen? Okay. Who deserves our trust and praise?

Secondly, how does God relate to the vulnerable? How does God relate to the vulnerable? Verse 6 goes on and it says, The Lord, the maker of heaven and earth, the sea and everything in them, he remains faithful forever.

The creator God keeps faith. He remains faithful forever. Human beings fail to do this over and over. And history is just littered with the disappointments of people who put all their marbles in the basket of mortals who fail them.

[14 : 02] But who is this God of Jacob, our help and our hope? Who is this God who remains faithful forever? Well, it says he's the maker of heaven and earth. And that means that he's transcendent in glory.

He's infinitely and eternally powerful. And he's sovereign and supreme over every square inch of created reality and over every creature whom he's formed in his image.

But here's the thing. Verses 7 and 9 does not say that he remains faithful forever only to powerful people, only to princes, only to elites, only to people at the top.

No. Who does this creator God, who does this God of Jacob especially help? Verse 7. He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry.

The Lord sets prisoners free. The Lord gives sight to the blind. The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down. The Lord loves the righteous. The Lord watches over the foreigner and sustains the fatherless and the widow. But he frustrates the way of the wicked.

[15 : 08] It's characteristic of this God of Jacob to be active on behalf of the burdened and the afflicted, on behalf of the lowly and the suffering.

He cares for the oppressed, for those who are poor and therefore are hungry, for those who are prisoners, for those who are blind and otherwise physically sick or impaired.

He cares for those who are bowed down and soul weary. He cares for immigrants, orphans, and single moms. It's quite a list of people in chronic and critical conditions.

And if you turn back again to the first book of the Bible, who do we see God helping? Whose cause is He upholding? And this is just, you know, astonishing to me because in ancient Near Eastern patriarchal culture, it's amazing how much attention is being given in that very first book of the Bible to women.

And not just to women, but to barren women. Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel. And even in the midst of those stories and all the time that's given to those stories, you have this other woman, her name's, she's an Egyptian slave.

[16 : 29] Her name is Hagar. And she's a pregnant woman. She's a single mom. She's been very badly mistreated by the people of God. And yet she's honored to be the first person in the Bible to name God.

She says to God, she looks to God and says, you are the God who sees me. You're the God who sees me. And later on, she's grief-stricken, she's sobbing, and God comes to this woman and he asks her this tender question.

He says, what troubles you, Hagar? Calls her by name. What troubles you, Hagar? And he comes and he meets her need and he cares for her son.

He upholds the cause of this oppressed woman who has no one caring for her. And if you turn to the second book of the Bible, who do we find God helping there?

He's helping slaves. Hebrew slaves, powerful men, are oppressing these Hebrew slaves with forced labor. They're using them for profit.

[17 : 35] They're destroying their children. And who are the heroes that we find on page one of that story? Again, it's women. Shipra. Puah.

This whole league of amazing Hebrew midwives who, like God, are upholding the cause of oppressed, expecting mothers and their babies.

Is there any literature in the ancient world that talks about God and women and slaves and children like our scriptures do?

I haven't found any yet and I've studied them quite a bit. So I want to invite us for a moment to just take a closer look at two particular Hebrew words because in verse 7, the Hebrew word therefore upholds the cause is mishpat.

Let's say that together. Mishpat. It occurs 200 plus times in the Old Testament and its most basic meaning is to execute justice, to treat people fairly, to give wrongdoers the punishment that they are due and then to give vulnerable people and victims of injustice the rights, the protection, the care that they are due.

[18 : 52] And if you look at every place that this word mishpat is used in the Old Testament, there are several classes of persons that continually come up. Over and over, it describes taking up the cause and the care of widows, orphans, immigrants, and the poor.

Very often called the Quartet of the Vulnerable. And the reason they're called the Quartet of the Vulnerable is because these groups have no economic or social power.

They lived at subsistence level and were only days away from starvation if there was any kind of famine or invasion or social unrest. And this means that they were easily trampled on, easily exploited, easily harmed.

Today, this Quartet of the Vulnerable could be expanded to include the refugee, the migrant worker, the homeless, many single parents, and elderly people.

These groups of people are most often neglected, ignored, and uncared for. And yet, the one true living God of the Bible, the maker of heaven and earth, he loves, he defends, he upholds the cause of justice for those with the least economic and social power, and so should we.

[20 : 10] We must have a strong concern for the vulnerable like God has, but there's more to the biblical idea of justice than that. And we get more insight into this second Hebrew word in verse 8 where it says, the Lord loves the righteous.

The Lord loves the tzadikah. Mishpat and tzadikah. The righteous, the tzadikah, are willing to disadvantage themselves in order to advantage the community.

The wicked are people who disadvantage the community in order to advantage themselves. But the righteous do the opposite of that. And in verse 7, it says that God upholds the cause, He gives food, He sets free, He gives sight, He lifts up, He loves, He watches over, He sustains, and the idea is that that is also what the righteous, the tzadikah, do as well.

And it's not surprising to us then to discover that these two Hebrew terms, mishpat and tzadikah, justice and righteousness, are brought together over three dozen times in the Bible as the characteristic ways that the people of God are to reflect the character of God into the world.

Here is this transcendent creator God of enormous power. He made heaven and earth and the seas and everything in them. And what it says is that He loves to use His power to uphold the cause of the oppressed.

[21 : 45] If you look at the other literature of the ancient world, the gods of the pagan nations, they use their power mainly for kings and for princes and for the elites and the people at the top.

But no, this God of the Bible, He loves to exercise His power on behalf of people at the bottom. And think about that. Where do the concepts of human rights, of the equal dignity of every person, the concept of the value of the poor and the weak or the necessity of caring for and advocating for the vulnerable, where do these concepts even come from?

They don't come from modern secular narratives. They don't come from atheistic frameworks whose metaphysical and moral assumptions should actually lead in the exact opposite direction that might makes right and the strong should devour the weak and the rich should trample upon the poor.

No. Anyone you talk to who values the idea of upholding the cause of the oppressed somewhere deep down inside, they know that the God of Psalm 146 exists and that they have a longing to know Him and be in a relationship with Him.

And anyone that you meet who values upholding the cause of the oppressed, somewhere along the way, they have unconsciously and just culturally kind of absorbed this biblical vision of divine justice and righteousness.

[23 : 23] And it's our incredible privilege as the people of God to champion the vision of the justice and righteousness of God both in word and in deed, both in witness and in service, both in proclamation and demonstration.

Does that make sense? This is who God is on behalf of the vulnerable. So, third thing, who deserves our trust and praise?

Not princes, but the Lord who will reign forever. How does God relate to the vulnerable? He relates to them in justice and righteousness. But then, how does the gospel compel us to serve?

How does the gospel compel us to serve? Well, verse 6 says this. It says, the Lord remains faithful forever. And that means that this is a God who stands with you.

He's a God who stands by you. But how can God do this? Because we've seen that there are two aspects of mishpat. There are two aspects of justice.

[24 : 32] Number one, it's giving wrongdoers the just punishment that they're due. And secondly, it's giving vulnerable victims of oppression the protection that they are due.

But this is where I personally find myself on the horns of a dilemma. Because if I've not loved my neighbor as myself, if I've not consistently and comprehensively upheld the cause of the oppressed, if I have in any way contributed to the misery of people or the suffering of the world, then have I not violated God's demands of justice?

And if I've in any way disadvantaged the community in order to advantage myself, if I have in any way ignored the hungry and the foreigner, if I've neglected the widow and the orphan, then shouldn't God be just in giving me the punishment that is my due?

Right? Doesn't verse 9 say that the Lord who made heaven and earth, He frustrates the way of the wicked or most translations say He brings the way of the wicked to ruin. Is that not me?

Is that not what should happen to me? Is that not what I deserve? And the answer of the Scriptures is yes it is. It is what I deserve.

[25 : 58] But the Gospel says this, the Gospel says that Jesus came not to bring that judgment on me, Jesus came to bear that judgment for me.

The Gospel says that God loved us so much that He became a helpless baby. He became a powerless and vulnerable mortal. And in that He came and He lived a life of perfect justice and righteousness.

He came, Jesus came and He upheld the cause of oppressed men and women. He came to the sick and He healed them. He came to people who were imprisoned in darkness and taken captive by demons and He released them.

He came to people who were sick and He healed them. He came to people who were lame and He caused them to walk. He came to people who were blind and He gave them sight. He came to people that were lepers and He cleansed them.

People who were deaf and they could hear. People who were dead and He raised them to life. Jesus, if anybody has ever come to stand with us and to stand by us and to remain faithful, Jesus is the one.

[27 : 13] But at the climax of His ministry, Jesus didn't just come and stand with us. He didn't just come and stand by us. Jesus came and stood in for us. Jesus came and He took our place on that cross and He bore that punishment that we deserved.

God's just judgment for our sins came down on Him so that it wouldn't come down on me and on you. And that gospel, that good news, is the very thing that compels us and motivates us to serve other people and embody His love.

Right? When I go out and I look at the poor and the weak, I should say to myself, you know, that's me. That's where I was.

And yet Jesus saw me in my poverty and in my weakness and in my vulnerability and He emptied Himself so that He could fill me up.

He lowered Himself so that He could raise me up. He impoverished Himself so that He could make me rich. And because of what God has done for me in Jesus Christ, I can now go and serve the poor and embody His character that's been revealed so clearly on His cross.

[28 : 39] And so I just want to conclude with some practical pastoral guidance for how we might serve in this way. I don't know exactly how God is calling you to exercise mishpat and zadikah, how He wants you to live a life of justice and righteousness, but I do want to offer a few suggestions in closing.

And you can go actually to our website, you can scan that QR code on your worship folder and it will take you to a webpage that says everything I'm going to say, okay?

So if you forget it, it's okay. You can go find all the details. But here's some opportunities for us to serve in the way that we've been served in the season ahead.

Number one, House of Faith Church in Hayward, you'll hear more about this later, they're going to be distributing Thanksgiving boxes of love to their neighbors. And we get to go and serve alongside them.

And each box is going to feed a family of six with turkey and stuffing and all the trimmings. And our goal is to distribute 300 of these boxes, 100 of which have been contributed by our Loaves and Fishes ministry here at Christ Church.

[29 : 53] So the next step, if God is calling you to serve in this way, is just to come join us on Saturday, November 23rd. Secondly, we heard about this last week, but 80 newly baptized brothers in Christ at St. Quentin Prison need study Bibles for their weekly training provided by the Urban Ministry Institute.

And these study Bibles will equip these men with tools that they need to deepen their walk with Christ. And so the next step for us is if you go on that webpage that I mentioned, it will have instructions for how you can support this Bible project or even how you can begin to serve in the Urban Ministry Institute over at St. Quentin Prison.

Third thing is Harbor House in Oakland is a Christ-centered community development organization. They run an annual Christmas store that will allow us to empower parents from the community to come and buy gifts for their kids.

It's significantly reduced prices. And the next step for us in that, if that's a way that God's calling you to serve, is that we can donate toys through their Amazon wish list or we can go shop for the toys themselves and bring them here by Sunday, December the 8th.

And we will deliver them to Harbor House. They also need some volunteers to help set up that Christmas store on Friday, December the 13th, and to run the store on Saturday, December the 14th.

[31 : 21] And again, all these details are on our webpage. The fourth thing I want to mention is that last fall, we helped to launch a child development center in Guatemala in partnership with Compassion International and with a thriving local church there, which is providing a foundation for spiritual, physical, cognitive, and social, emotional development for 200 children in that child development center.

75 of those children are directly sponsored by us here in our Christchurch family. And the next step that we could take is to just deepen our impact by logging into our Compassion account.

You can go write a letter to your child. You can give a special Christmas gift to your sponsored child. If you've not yet had the privilege of sponsoring a child, you can make a lasting change.

There's actually four children left in that center to be sponsored. My prayer is that they'd have a sponsor by the end of today. And if God's not calling you to sponsor a child, you can go and make a one-time Christmas donation to their Christmas fund.

The last thing I want to mention as I close is just that as we look ahead to 2025, as we begin to sort through all the demands on our time and attention and energy, as we build our calendars, where do the weak, where do the vulnerable, where do the poor factor into our lives?

[32 : 59] How is God calling you to join in His work of upholding the cause of the oppressed, of using your time, your talents, your treasures to reflect His character of justice and righteousness into the world?

I'll just close with this great word from the Apostle John. He says this in 1 John chapter 3. This is how we know what love is.

Jesus Christ laid down His life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person?

Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Amen.