

The Justice of God

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[0:00] Hi everyone. We're going to read from Isaiah chapter 59 verses 1 to 20. Surely the arm of the Lord is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear.

But your iniquities have separated you from your God. Your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear. For your hands are stained with blood, your fingers with guilt, your lips have spoken lies, and your tongue mutters wicked things.

No one calls for justice. No one pleads his case with integrity. They rely on empty arguments and speak lies. They conceive trouble and give birth to evil. They hatch the eggs of vipers and spin a spider's web. Whoever eats their eggs will die, and when one is broken, an adder is hatched.

Their cobwebs are useless for clothing. They cannot cover themselves with what they make. Their deeds are evil deeds, and acts of violence are in their hands. Their feet rush into sin.

They are swift to shed innocent blood. Their thoughts are evil thoughts. Ruin and destruction mark their ways. The way of peace they do not know. There is no justice in their paths.

[1:23] They have turned them into crooked roads. No one who walks in them will know peace. So justice is far from us, and righteousness does not reach us. We look for light, but all is darkness.

For brightness, but we walk in deep shadows. Like the blind, we grope along the wall, feeling our way like men without eyes. At midday, we stumble as if it were twilight.

Among the strong, we are like the dead. We all growl like bears. We moan mournfully like doves. We look for justice, but find none. For deliverance, but it is far away.

For our offences are many in your sight, and our sins testify against us. Our offences are ever with us, and we acknowledge our iniquities. Rebellion and treachery against our Lord, turning our backs on our God.

Fomenting oppression and revolt, uttering lies our hearts have conceived. So justice is driven back, and righteousness stands at a distance. Truth has stumbled in the streets.

[2:32] Honesty cannot enter. Truth is nowhere to be found, and whoever shuns evil becomes a prey. The Lord looked and was displeased that there was no justice.

He saw that there was no one. He was appalled that there was no one to intervene. So his own arm worked salvation for him, and his own righteousness sustained him.

He put on righteousness as his breastplate and the helmet of salvation on his head. He put on the garments of vengeance and wrapped himself in zeal as in a cloak.

According to what they have done, so will he repay. Wrath to his enemies and retribution to his foes. He will repay the islands their due. From the west, men will fear the name of the Lord, and from the rising of the sun, they will revere his glory.

For he will come like a pent-up flood that the breath of the Lord drives along. The Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who repent of their sins, declares the Lord.

[3:36] This is the word of the Lord. Good morning, everyone. My name is Martin.

If you still have your Bibles open at Isaiah chapter 59, keep them open there. We'll be going to Isaiah 58 and 59 towards the end of my talk. And the passages we'll be looking at before then will mostly come up on the screen.

So you can follow along on the screen for those. We're looking this morning at the justice of God. And if you have a bulletin, you'll see the outline there.

Really three main sections to this talk. Justice as retribution, justice as right, and justice as restoration. But let's commit our time together to the Lord. Let's pray and ask for his help.

Heavenly Father, thank you that we can gather this morning and sing your praises. You are worthy of all praise. Father, we thank you that you speak to us in your word.

[4:37] And we ask that as we meditate on it this morning, that you would move us, draw us into a deeper understanding of who you are, your character, and all that you have done for our salvation.

We pray that our hearts will be uplifted this morning. Please help me to speak clearly and faithfully as I ought. And may you write your word on all of our hearts.

In Jesus' name, amen. Well, I wonder what comes to mind when I say the phrase, the justice of God.

The justice of God. God's justice. Jesus. I wonder if what first comes to mind for you, or maybe for some of us, is an image of God as a grim judge, gavel in hand, ready to find people guilty, and to deliver a sentence.

I wonder if you picture God as judge when I speak about God's justice. What comes to mind is God's judicial or legal justice, the justice of law courts, the justice of trial and punishment.

[6:02] Is that what first comes to mind for you? I know we discussed this at my Bible study group on Wednesday evening last week, and for most of us, that was what first comes to mind.

The justice of God. The judicial justice of God. And we see this in the Bible. So we see, for example, in Psalm 96, God's justice is expressed in his act of judgment.

So Psalm 96 verse 13 says, The Lord comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples in his faithfulness.

God's judgment, you see there in Psalm 96 verse 13, is universal in scope. He judges the earth. He judges the world, the peoples. Everyone is facing the judgment of God.

And God's judgment is executed in perfect justice. He judges in righteousness and in faithfulness. If you read verse 13, which comes at the end of the psalm, if you read that in context, you'll recognize that the response of creation to God's act of judgment is one of jubilation.

[7:19] You've got it there in verses 11 and 13. The heavens are glad, the earth's rejoicing. And 12, the trees of the forest are singing for joy because God comes to judge in righteousness.

I wonder, is that, as we think about God coming to judge the world in righteousness, are we singing for joy with the trees of the forest?

My family, we live near a train line. You can walk through our backyard, hop over the back fence and there's some bushland there.

And a short walk through the bushland will take you to the train line. And it's a train line that carries those coal trains from the Hunter Valley to Newcastle and back again.

You know those coal trains, dozens and dozens of carriages laden with coal. They bear down along that track with this unstoppable momentum.

[8:22] And a short walk through the bush at the back of our place and there it is, the train line. No fences. No warning signs. You just walk through the bush and hop onto the train line if you want to.

We've told our kids, never go on the train line. Even if you can't see a train anywhere, even if you can't hear a train coming, don't walk on the train line.

Never go on the train line. So you don't want to put yourself in the path of a Newcastle coal train.

And yet all people are in the path of the coming judgment of God.

God judges the world. He judges the peoples. All people are in the path of the coming judgment of God. Our sin puts us on the train track.

And the Bible is very clear. All have sinned. There's no one righteous, not even one. So when I think about God's judgment, I find it unnerving.

[9:39] I find it unsettling. Because God's judgment means retribution. It means, that word, retribution, just means being paid back. God's judgment means he pays back our sin.

He punishes our sin. That idea of retribution is expressed in numerous passages in the Bible. Here's one of them. Romans 2, verses 5 and 6.

Because of your hard and impenitent, that's unrepentant, your hard and impenitent heart, you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.

He will render to each one according to his works. That's an uncomfortable thought. Remember the criminal on the cross next to Jesus?

One criminal was mocking Jesus. The other criminal said to the first criminal, Don't you fear God? Since you're under the same sentence of crucifixion, and we justly, for we are receiving the due reward for our deeds.

[10:47] That criminal facing death, recognised he was receiving what his deeds deserved. A just punishment for his sins.

When I think about the coal train of God's judgment, I don't find myself easily singing for joy with the trees of the forest, but rather trembling with the criminal on the cross.

Now last week, we were talking about the kindness of God. And as we discussed the kindness of God, we looked at a key moment of revelation in Exodus chapter 34, when God reveals his name, his glory, his goodness, his character to Moses, and thereby to Israel as well.

And we saw that God's revelation to Moses was of his kindness, and I pointed to a magnificent trio of words that God is merciful, that God is gracious, and that he's abounding in steadfast love.

That beautiful kindness of God. But when we were looking at it last week, we kind of cut God's revelation halfway through. Because the latter part of God's self-revelation to Moses concerns not his kindness, but his justice.

[12:04] I'll read from Exodus 34 verses 6 and 7. Then the Lord passed before Moses and proclaimed, The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.

See, there's the kindness of God. But how does it continue? But who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers and the children and the children's children to the third and fourth generation.

Now, don't get hung up on the bit about children's children to the third and fourth generation.

Basically, it's a dramatic way of expressing the idea that God will completely punish sin.

The full punishment that sin deserves. There's a terrible and tragic high-profile court case in America at the moment.

Maybe you've been following this in the news about a triple murder. I won't say anything more about it than that. But that court case has just ended in a mistrial.

[13:22] The jury were unable to agree, and so the judge dismissed them. And the trial itself has been so widely publicised that the prosecutors are saying, well, a retrial may not be possible because we don't actually know whether we'd even be able to find 12 jurors who are unacquainted with the case who could sit in a jury.

But there are no mistrials with God. Every verdict God delivers is true, and every sentence of punishment that he hands over is complete.

Sin is and will be punished to its full extent. Now, Exodus 34 verses 6 and 7 leave a question hanging for us.

How do God's kindness and God's justice work together? How can God forgive iniquity, transgression and sin, and yet also simultaneously by no means clear the guilty?

I mean, aren't they contradictory? How can he do both? How can God be merciful and just at the same time? Now, that is absolutely the right question to ask.

[14:44] It's the question that God's self-revelation to Moses should lead us to ask. And that is, of course, a question that leads us into the meaning of the cross of Christ.

Now, we'll circle back to that later. But I know that many of you know your Bibles.

I know that most of us gathered here have been well taught. And for you, what I have just raised is a very familiar line of thought. That line of thought where we pose the question, God, how can God be merciful and just at the same time and follow the logic through to the answer God gives in the cross of Christ that's familiar to you?

We follow that question through to, for example, Romans chapter 3, verses 21 to 26, which Leon Morris called possibly the most important single paragraph ever written about the justice of God in Jesus dying as a propitiation for our sins so that God can be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

You know that. That's a firmly embedded part of your Christian framework as it should be. But I think there is one risk that we have as reformed evangelical Protestants.

[16:19] And the risk is this, that we can be so strong on the legal, judicial, retributive justice of God that we might sometimes slip into thinking that when we've spoken about God's judgment, we've said all there is to say about the justice of God.

Judgment and retribution are what first come to mind when we think of God's justice and there's a risk that our thoughts stop there and go no further. I want to suggest to you that if they are the only thoughts we have about God's justice, then we'll actually end up with the distorted picture of who God is.

Because retributive justice is only part of what the Bible has to say about the justice of God. Indeed, it's the smaller part.

It's a secondary and derivative part. Let me try and prove that to you. I think I can ask you one question that will, and you will immediately recognise that when it comes to the justice of God, judgement and retribution are secondary, not primary.

One question. One question and you'll see that the punishment for sin is not really at the heart of God's justice.

[17 : 52] Here's the question. Would it still be true that God himself is righteous and just if Adam and Eve had never sinned?

Let me make it even clearer. If not only humanity but even the devil and the devil's angels had never fallen into sin, that is, if all God's creatures had remained obedient to him, if there was no sin to be punished, could you still say that God himself is perfectly righteous and perfectly just?

I mean, sure, that's a hypothetical question but do you see the question? I think you would have to answer that question with a resounding yes.

See, look at Deuteronomy 32 verse 3 to 4. Now, isn't it true that all God's ways are justice irrespective of whether there is any sin for God to punish?

All his ways are justice. Not just the act of retribution. Everything God does is justice. Or look at Psalm 33 verses 4 and 5.

[19 : 44] 5. For the word of the Lord is upright and all his work is done in faithfulness. He loves righteousness and justice.

The earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord. Now, in Exodus 34 verses 6 and 7, we feel a tension.

There's a tension there in God's revelation to Moses, a tension between God's mercy and his justice, his steadfast love in Exodus 34 and his justice.

How can God be merciful and just at the same time? But there's no tension in Psalm 33 verses 4 and 5 between God's righteousness and justice and steadfast love.

There's no tension there. The next verse in the Psalm, the next verse is going to talk about God's work of creation in language that's very reminiscent of Genesis chapter 1.

[20 : 48] Faithfulness, righteousness, justice, steadfast love characterise all of God's work. Now, let me pause here to say something about language while we've still got those verses on the screen.

Last week, when we looked at the kindness of God, I pointed to that magnificent trio of words, compassion, grace, steadfast love. This week, as we consider the justice of God, the two key words are those I've highlighted there in the first line of verse 5, Psalm 33 verse 5, righteousness and justice.

The Hebrew word for righteousness is the word tzedakah, tzedakah, which is usually translated as righteousness. The word translated there as justice is the word mishpat, which is sometimes or often translated as judgment.

Whenever in English Bibles, if ever in the Old Testament, if you see the word justice in English, it's probably translating a form of one of those two words, tzedakah or mishpat.

Mishpat. But also, those two words are often paired together, righteousness and justice. They're brought together. There are other words that are linked to them at times, like uprightness, which you can see there in the first line of verse 4, truth.

[22 : 04] The word faithfulness there in the second line of verse 4, that's often grouped with the justice words or with the kindness words, because God is always, he's faithfully, he's consistently who he is, unfailingly so.

But when we get those two words together, righteousness and justice, tzedakah and mishpat, that justice duo, that's talking about the justice of God in some form.

And Psalm 33 verse 5 says that God loves, he loves righteousness and justice. He delights in it.

He is absolutely committed to what is right. Here's another example, Psalm 89 verse 14, righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne, of your throne.

Steadfast love and faithfulness go before you. God's rule as the divine king, the ruler overall, is founded on what is right. And what is right is ultimately determined by who God himself is, by God's own character.

[23 : 28] So the reason we live in a universe where kindness is right and cruelty is wrong is because God himself is kind. God defines what is right. So the deepest sense of justice in the Bible is justice as right.

God is a basis for morality. There is absolute goodness. There is a way things are supposed to be. And that way the Bible calls justice and righteousness. Good is more substantial than evil. Good is more real than evil. Good is eternal. Evil is temporary. Good is in its own right because God is good.

Evil is parasitic. It can only ever occur as a corruption of what is good. And justice as right is more essential than justice as judgment.

[24 : 42] judgment. To quote Christian ethicist Oliver O'Donovan, justice as right is a presupposition of justice as judgment. You can see that, can't you?

Justice as right is a presupposition of justice as judgment. In other words, you can only engage in an act of judgment if there is right that is the basis of your judgment.

judgment. If there's no right, there can be no judgment. If there's no law, there can be no law courts. In one sense, judgment only becomes necessary when there's been transgression, when there's a deviation from what's right. justice as right is general justice.

Justice as right is what God always is and what God does all the time. Justice as judgment is special justice. It's a tool which God picks up and puts down again.

[25 : 57] Now, we've already seen that justice in the sense of right, capital R right, is an attribute of God himself. That what defines right is the character of God.

And I think this is important to grasp, right, this point I'm making, so that we have fitting thoughts about God and his justice. God's positive justice precedes his negative justice.

justice. Yes, God's justice means that he's determined to punish sin. But God's justice means he's determined to punish sin because God's justice means that he is absolutely, fundamentally, immutably committed to what is right, to what is good.

He is just, he does justice, he establishes justice, justice. And his act of judgment is one move God makes in establishing justice.

Let me say four more things about justice as right. I'll try and say these quite quickly and then we'll move on to the third point, justice as restoration. Let me say four more things about justice as right. First, justice as right is imprinted on creation.

[27 : 18] It's imprinted on creation. Now, God in his freedom, he has made things a particular way. There is a natural order to what God has made.

Some things are right purely because of who God is, and it's hard to imagine that they could possibly be different. God being who he is, they couldn't be otherwise. Speaking the truth is right, and lying is not right because God is true.

As I said earlier, kindness is right and cruelty is not right because God is kind, because of who God is. But there are other things that could have been different if God had made the world a different way.

Like a composer writing music, God has made the creation the way he wanted it to be, but he was free to make it however he liked in accordance with his character.

If you take a piece of music, say Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, Beethoven could have chosen different notes. He could have arranged the various parts differently, but he wrote it a certain way.

[28 : 31] He wrote it the way he wanted it to be, according to his freedom as a composer. If you are now part of an orchestra that is playing Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, you don't have the same freedom that Beethoven had.

There is a way it is supposed to be. If you play different notes, then you're playing the wrong notes. As a member of an orchestra, you don't have the composer's freedom.

As creatures in God's creation, we don't have the creator's freedom. With justice, the way things are supposed to be in this world is determined both by God's immutable character, but also just by the way he's made the world, by God's creative freedom.

For example, God gives animate creatures, humans and animals, he gives us, in Genesis chapter 1, plants and fruit trees as food.

The way things are supposed to be, if you read Genesis chapters 1 and 2, is that vegetation, the plants and fruit trees, are supposed to produce enough food to sustain animal and human life.

[29 : 47] Now, that's expanded to where God permits, I'll get to that in a moment. So, they produce enough food to sustain animal and human life. So, where there's a drought and the crops fail and the fruit trees perish, when there's a drought and creatures die because of insufficient food, food, that's not the way things are meant to be.

God, after the flood, permits humans to kill and eat animals, but God does not permit animals to kill and eat humans. God says, you know, he says that animals, the blood of humans will be required of them because humans are made in the image of God.

So, there's an order. Humans are placed over animals and humans can eat animals, but animals can't eat humans. There's a way things are supposed to be. For us, right, the way things are supposed to be is determined both by who God is and also by the natural order of the creation which he's established.

That's the first thing. Second thing about justice is right is revealed to us. Psalm 119 is a lengthy song and one of the main themes is the excellence of God's word, his law.

And a number of times the psalmist combines that justice word pair, mishpat and tzedek, form of the righteousness word, in an expression for God's word.

[31 : 14] So to give you a couple of examples, Psalm 119 verse 7, I'll praise you with an upright heart when I learn your righteous rules. When I learn your righteous rules is literally when I learn the judgments of your righteousness, that justice word pair.

Or Psalm 119 verse 60, the sum of your word is truth and every judgment of your righteousness endures forever. God's revealed word encapsulates his justice.

He's made his justice, his righteousness known to us. Proverbs makes a similar point about wisdom. In Proverbs chapter 1 verses 1 to 3, the Proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel, to know wisdom and instruction, to understand words of insight, to receive instruction in wise dealing, in righteousness, justice, and equity.

That's the uprightness word, that last one there. Justice is revealed to us, thirdly, so that we can do it. Justice as right is required of us.

So Proverbs 21 verse 3, to do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice. Or a famous passage from Amos, Amos 5 verse 22 to 24, even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them, and the peace offerings of your fattened animals, I will not look upon them, take away from me the noise of your songs, to the melody of your harps, I will not listen, but let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.

[32 : 58] What's God saying to the people through the prophet Amos? Religion without justice is empty. Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.

God requires justice of us. The fourth thing to say is that the right that God requires of us includes the kind of right that's needed when things have gone wrong.

Let me say that again. The right God requires of us includes the kind of right that is needed when things have gone wrong. So now we're going to finally get to Isaiah chapters 58 and 59.

Have a look at this with me. Isaiah chapter 58 verses 1 and 2. Let me just, we're going to get a little bit of context here. Isaiah 58 verses 1 and 2.

Cry aloud, do not hold back, lift up your voice like a trumpet, declare to my people their transgression, to the house of Jacob their sins. Yet they seek me daily and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that did righteousness and did not forsake the judgment of their God.

[34 : 14] They ask of me righteous judgments and they delight to draw near to God. Can you see that justice word pair there in verse 2? Israel are seeking God, they're praying to him, they're engaging in religion or Judah rather, trying to draw near to God, as if they actually were people who did righteousness and didn't forsake justice.

This is a chapter, Isaiah 58 is a chapter about Judah's failure to do righteousness and justice.

They're asking God to do justice but they're failing to do it themselves.

Now how have they been failing to do justice? Well it's both in what they've done and in what they've failed to do. They've committed sins of commission and sins of omission.

So in what they did, look at verse 3 and 4. Why have we fasted, they ask, and you not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves and you take no knowledge of it?

Why aren't you listening to our prayers, God? Here's God's answer. Behold, in the day of your fast, you seek your own pleasure and oppress all your workers. Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to

fight and to hit with a wicked fist.

[35 : 32] Fasting like this day will not make your voice to be heard on high. See, there's their sins of commission, oppression, fighting, quarrelling, violence. That's how they're failing in justice.

But they're also failing by what they did not do, their sins of omission. Look down at verse 6. Is not this the fast I choose? To loose the bonds of wickedness?

To undo the straps of the yoke? To let the oppressed go free and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and to bring the homeless poor into your house?

When you see the naked to cover him and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? Then shall your light break forth like the dawn and your healing shall spring up speedily. And your righteousness shall go before you.

The glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. We could go on. Verse 10.

[36 : 33] Or verse 9. If you take away the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger and speaking wickedness, if you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday.

What is the justice God wants of us? Well, it includes the kind of right that's needed when things have gone wrong. We've seen justice as retribution, the punishment for evil.

We've seen justice as right, the way things ought to be. Now we're beginning to see a third form of justice, justice as restoration. Restoration, like retribution, presupposes right, that there is a way things are supposed to be.

And it presupposes that things have gone off track. In a world where things are not as they are supposed to be, God wants his people to be agents of restoration.

In a world that's haywire because of sin, where there's misery and grief and suffering, God wants his people to bring relief. It is right that people are free from tyranny and oppression.

[37 : 54] And so God calls on us to loose the bonds of wickedness and to break every yoke. It is right when all have enough to eat.

And so God calls on us to share our food with the hungry. It is right when we all, all of us have secure shelter, somewhere to live. And so God calls on his people to bring the homeless into their houses, to clothe the naked.

Verse 7, not hide yourself from your own flesh. How can we look on another human being who's suffering, our own flesh and blood made in God's image, and turn away from their need?

But of course the point of Isaiah 58 and 59 is that that's what humanity have done. I mean these words are written to Judah, particularly in Isaiah's day, the 8th century BC, but they're equally true of us, of all, of all humanity.

The consequences of our failure to do justice and righteousness are twofold. Firstly, there's a separation between God and us. Chapter 59, verse 1, verse 2, your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear.

[39 : 15] We're cut off from God. Second consequences is that there's the breakdown of society and community life. Verse 4, no one enters suit justly, no one goes to law honestly.

This is chapter 59. They rely on empty pleas, they speak lies, they conceive mischief and give birth to iniquity. No justice breaks down in society. Verse 7, their feet run to evil, they're swift to shed innocent blood, their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity.

Desolation and destruction are in their highways. The way of peace they do not know. There's no justice in their paths. They've made their roads crooked. No one who treads on them knows peace. Therefore, justice is far from us and righteousness does not overtake us.

We hope for light and behold darkness and for brightness, but we walk in gloom. Isaiah 59 verse 14, justice is turned back and righteousness stands far away.

For truth has stumbled in the public squares and uprightness cannot enter. Truth is lacking and he who departs from evil makes himself a prey.

[40 : 25] And those last few verses sound familiar, don't they? Truth has stumbled in the public squares, he who departs from evil makes himself a prey. Just think of the number of lies and falsehoods that are trumpeted in the media and in parliament and in the public squares of our society.

Try to defend in public the truth that an unborn baby is a human being and they will come for you. But what I want you to see is God's response.

[illegible]