

Vision Series 2023

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[0 : 00] On the 28th of August 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. stood in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. and delivered what is regarded as one of the most famous speeches of the 20th century. It's familiar to many people, the I Have a Dream speech, which in part goes like this. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed. We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal. I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream that one day, even in the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice. I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin, but by the content of their character. I have a dream today. Is religion, and specifically Christianity, a force for justice and good in the world, or is it a force for injustice and oppression in the world? Now, it's possible to compile an enormous number of historical events and movements to support either the negative or the positive answer to that question. One of the most obvious cases in point is the African slave trade and the abolition of slavery. The African Christians led the way in the abolition of the abolishing of the slave trade. And yet the creators and the defenders of the slave trade were also Christians who had biblical scholars to support the practice with a bunch of proof texts, even good people with a bunch of proof texts. Even today, we have plenty of evidence of the abuse of women and children in many countries dominated by religion and within religious institutions in our own country. In the end, the relationship of religion to justice cannot be answered simply by adding up religious abuses, injustices on the one side of a sheet, and the list of religious good and contributions on the other side of the sheet, and working out where does the balance end.

The good may outnumber the abuses, in fact, even by far, but wrongdoings have a tendency to lodge more deeply in our memory and our conscience, and that the hurts go on and on and on. In the end, I think it's better to look at the basis and the motivation to pursue justice in the world and compare which worldview supports and motivates to make the world a more just and equitable place for all people. Now, if you just tuned into us today, we are in our annual vision series. Every message in this vision series assumes the very first talk.

That's just an encouragement to go back there and listen to the first talk if you haven't already. We began by seeing that there is no 100% watertight argument for the existence of God. You can't prove the existence of God philosophically with evidence, so on and so forth, you know, empirical evidence.

But there's also no watertight argument for the non-existence of God. You also cannot prove the non-existence of God philosophically or by putting it into some sort of a laboratory and proving it. That means that every single person, the religious person and the atheist, are all viewing the world through a belief system. That is, atheism is not the absence of belief. It is a different set of beliefs.

[4 : 39] And so, the question that we've been looking at, which one gives the person who lives in this world what they need in order to flourish in life? We've been particularly looking at Western secularism, because that's the context that we're all currently living in right now.

And it's, the secularism is particularly the dominant theme that's running through much of our institutions and media and so on today in this society. So, we're looking at that.

It's also the culture that I sit in, and so it's much easier for me to throw stones at my own culture than it is to throw it at others, but do what you need to do to do that process for your own culture.

There's no such thing as a perfect culture. And so, today, we're looking at the question, does secularism or Christianity give every human being what they need to flourish in life, and particularly the issue of justice? So, today, it's Jesus all about justice.

We're going to see that the Christian faith gives us a justice that does not create more oppressors. We're going to begin with the question of human rights, then look at secularism's contribution and then, finally, the Christian contribution. So, first of all, if you've got the St. Paul's app, it'd be great if you can go there. It will help you enormously to follow through along with this talk or just take notes as you go along. So, first of all, let's kick off with human rights.

If you go to the website for the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, you will read this statement. Human rights are rights we have simply because we exist as human beings.

[6 : 28] They are not granted by any state. These universal rights are inherent to us all, regardless of nationality, sex, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, language, or any other status. They range from the most fundamental, the right to life, to those that make life worth living, such as the rights to food, education, work, health, and liberty.

The question is, however, why do people have these rights? That's the really more fundamental question. Why?

You see, the United Nations Universal Declaration for Human Rights doesn't actually answer that question. It just states it.

It lists human rights without any explanation. And the quote that just there says that they simply exist because you're a human being.

So is it enough to say that human beings have rights without any reasoning, without any explanation whatsoever?

[7 : 48] Well, Western secularists insist that their view of human rights is simply self-evident, without giving any grounds for them at all.

Now, Mari Ruti, I think that's her name, is a distinguished professor of critical theory in gender and sexuality studies at the University of Toronto in Canada.

In her book, *The Call of Character*, she writes this, Although I believe that values are socially constructed rather than God-given, I do not believe that gender inequality is any more defensible than racial inequality, despite efforts to pass it off as cultural-specific custom rather than an instance of injustice.

See what she says there? On the same page in the book, she is suggesting that values are socially constructed. Every society constructs their own values.

Then she adds that her own Western culture's view of inequality must be embraced by every culture. Incoherent on the same page as a secularist.

[9 : 18] She gives no reason for it whatsoever, she just asserts it. If you are proposing a position that some behaviour is wrong and should be stopped, without justifying it, then there is no way you can even have a conversation about it with someone who disagrees with you.

There's no basis for a conversation. All you have left is shouting at the other person until they submit.

And so this leaves the secular human rights activists quite vulnerable, which is what a number of sociologists are doing nowadays, are realising. It leaves them quite vulnerable to charges of imperialism.

If human rights exist just because we say so, then activists can only coerce others. The atheist Friedrich Nietzsche, no friend of Christianity whatsoever, this guy, insisted that benevolence and social justice activism in the modern society is really powered by hatred and a contempt of others. It's pretty damning. Now, some secular thinkers have tried to explain why human rights exist. Because they realise we've got a problem if you just have to yell at people and tell them that they do.

[11 : 01] So why do they exist? Three main arguments. I'll go through them really quickly, except for the last one. Less quickly than the other two. The first is natural law.

That is, this is just saying that when you look at nature and how nature works, it's obvious that people are worth more than the rest of nature. The problem is, you cannot hold to that view that people are worth more than the rest of nature, while at the same time holding to the very foundation of secularism, and that is evolutionary biology.

You can't hold both of those two together. Evolutionary biology says that the strong eat the weak, and so the weak must be conquered and oppressed for the sake of the advancement of society.

It has no quality and no category whatsoever. Evolutionary biology has no category whatsoever for equality and rights. Then there's the argument that society creates rights.

Now, I touched on this one on my sermon a while ago, Jesus all about goodness, when we're looking at morality and so on. As I said there, it's not a great idea to conclude that society comes up with right and wrong, or the cursed society creates rights, because what if the majority of society choose to kill the minority of society?

[12 : 35] You're left nowhere else to argue, because the majority have voted on it. And that has happened on, and that continues to happen in our world. Thirdly, is the argument that the ground of human rights is based on capacity.

That is, and this one I think is very troublesome, human rights have rights, human beings, sorry, have rights because of their capacity for rational thought, rational choice, and other aptitudes that the animal world doesn't have.

This is really serious. For example, newborn infants do not yet have those capacities, nor do those in a coma, nor do those mentally impaired in some way, nor do many of the very elderly.

This argument just ends up saying that not all human beings have rights. Can you see the trajectory of this in our own society, in Western civilization?

The rise of full-term abortions, euthanasia, and it all comes down to capacity. This, I think, is where Western secularism really, this particular worldview, struggles to be consistent.

[14 : 09] To have those views and yet also pursue justice in our world, and let me tell you, I just want to say, on top of all this, I believe that our day and age, we tend to probably be more attuned to injustice in the world than what we're used to.

So I think there's a bunch of good stuff happening in spite of all of this. But inevitably, to have a consistent worldview, they must import their values from another worldview.

That is, their system of issue of rights and injustice must be stolen from another system, another worldview.

And ultimately, that system and that worldview is the Christian faith. That's because a great, Charles Taylor, I think it was, great piece of work, looking back centuries and centuries and centuries of history, and said the concept of human rights began with a Christian faith.

It began with a Christian faith. It didn't develop for the first time in the Enlightenment, as many claim, but it began with medieval Christianity based on the Bible.

[15 : 36] But the question is, well, hang on a bit, but doesn't Christianity have its own problems with justice? And the answer to that is, of course, yes. Yes. But not so fast as well.

Without any belief in objective moral facts, there is no way that you can build a program of justice. And yet, it is also true that many religions with their absolute claims have abused and have oppressed people throughout the centuries and across cultures.

So what's the way forward? Well, Richard Bauckham of the University of St. Andrews, now retired, writes in his essay, *Reading Scripture as a Coherent Story*, he writes this, we need a story that once again affirms universal values while resisting their co-option by the forces of domination. In short, what he's saying there is, we need a non-oppressive, absolute truth worldview. A non-oppressive, absolute truth worldview.

We cannot work for justice without some acknowledgement of universal moral values, but we also need something that undermines the natural, powerful, human inclination to dominate other people.

[17 : 19] And Bauckham believes that what we need lies right within the Christian faith. as described in the biblical storyline. The biblical storyline starts with a loving God creating humanity in his image.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. sought a just society on a much stronger, in fact, a considerably stronger footing than modern secular people.

And the way he pursued that was vastly different than the modern secular person. He was against violence. He was against coercion.

He argued that segregation of society was not simply impractical for the overall good of society. He argued that it was, in fact, a sin.

He knew that human rights have no power if they are just simply created by the majority or imposed by some judicial system. Human rights have power only if they exist on their own, dependent only on the fact that a person in the front of you is, in fact, a human being equal with you.

[18 : 35] And so, drawing on the biblical teaching that every human being is created in the image of God, Genesis 1, 26, 27, which is just read out to us, he wrote that God's image in us gives every person a uniqueness, it gives him worth, it gives him a dignity, and we must never forget this as a nation.

There are no gradations in the image of God. Every man from a treble white to a bass black is significant on God's keyboard, precisely because every man is made in the image of God. That is, the Christian faith gives us the strongest, strongest possible foundation for the idea of human rights. every person who comes into your presence has an inherent worth and a sacred dignity, every single one of them, including the ones you disagree with.

To further build on this, the biblical story is one of reversal. It reveals a story of God's repeated choice, repeated choice of the dominated and the wretched, the powerless and the marginal.

The Bible begins with the book of Genesis, written in a time when the passing of all the family's wealth and estate went to the eldest son. That was the iron law of its time in virtually all of society.

[20 : 21] Every other child was a spare. But Genesis is subversive. It is subversive in its cultural, in this cultural norm.

God constantly chooses and works through the sons without the power, without the social collateral. He chooses Abel over Cain, Isaac over Ishmael, Jacob over Esau, Joseph over Reuben. And when God works with women, he does not choose the women with the cultural power. He does not choose the ones with the beauty and the sexuality. He works through the old and the infertile Sarah, not through the younger Hagar.

Through the unloved and unattractive Leah, not through Rachel. God repeatedly refuses to allow his gracious activity to run along the expected lines of worldly influence and privilege.

You don't see it anywhere. In his economy, the person on the outer is the person in the center. As the Bible storyline marches on, we see God standing beside Israel in slavery against the oppression of the greatest empire in the world at that time.

[21 : 42] Then there is the story of the judges with the deliverers and leaders who led Israel whenever it fell under the dominion of a powerful nation. God mostly in those cases mostly raises up someone from a smaller tribe, from a lower status, a lower family status, or even the class of social outclasses.

For instance, Jephthah, Gideon, Samson. He even uses women, which was not the cultural norm at that time. And then in Samuel, David, the king, is the youngest and the smallest of Jesse's sons. Then there's the New Testament where Jesus Christ encounters a respected male and a socially marginalized woman in John 3 and 4, or a religious leader and tax collector in Luke 18, or a religious teacher and a fallen woman in Luke 7.

It is always the outsider, the socially marginalized person who connects more readily with Jesus. Always. And along with this narrative of the reversal of the weak and the strong, the rich and the poor, there is a wide and deep river of ethical teaching and appeal to all Christians to pursue justice in the world.

The Old Testament prophets insist that a lack of care for the poor and needy is a sign of a lack of genuine faith in God.

[23 : 19] Isaiah 1, 17, 58, 6 and 7. The New Testament likewise teaches that a practical love for the poor is a mark of a heart changed by grace.

We just had that read out to us in James chapter 2. But crucially though, crucially, the reason for this persistent storyline in the Bible is because the ultimate example of God's work in the world was Jesus Christ himself.

Jesus Christ is the only founder of a world religion, of one of the major world religions, who died in disgrace, died abandoned by everybody whom he cared about, including his heavenly father. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? He was the victim of a miscarriage of justice, he died oppressed and helpless. And salvation comes to us through his poverty, through his rejection, through his weakness.

Christians are not saved in any way by summoning up their strength and accomplishing great deeds, but in fact by admitting their weakness and their need for a saviour.

[24 : 44] Essentially what the Christian gospel is, is Jesus calling out to us and saying, you can't do it. You must rely upon me. A salvation earned by works and moral effort always, always, always favours the more able, the competent, the accomplished and the privileged.

Always does. Salvation by sheer grace favours the failed, the outsider, the weak, because it goes only to those who know salvation must be by sheer grace.

you see, what the Bible doesn't do for us, it does not show us a story after story after story of heroes of the faith who go from strength to strength to strength.

Instead, we get a series of stories containing figures who are usually not the people that the world would expect to be spiritual leaders and rescuers of others.

Even some of the most ableist human beings who have ever lived, let's say Abraham and David in the Bible, they themselves could not rise above the brutality of their own cultures, nor the self-centeredness of their own hearts.

[26 : 18] But by clinging to the wondrous promise that God's grace is given to moral failures, ultimately they triumphed in humility.

The Bible is a record of God's intervening grace in the lives of people who don't seek it, who don't deserve it, who consistently resist it, and who don't appreciate it once they've been saved by it. So let me say gently, if this surprises you at all, it may mean that you have bought into a completely mistaken idea what the Christian faith is.

Namely, that Christianity is about how those who live morally and good lives are consistently taken to heaven. there is one final chapter in the Christian worldview, the story that marches through the Bible, and that is the chapter where God winds up all of history.

And all of humanity who have ever lived will stand before Jesus Christ and give account of their lives and the final day of justice.

[27 : 41] all those who have suppressed God and oppressed others will be eternally condemned. But all those who have responded to the grace of Jesus Christ in weakness and humility will be brought into his presence forever.

forever. It will be an eternity of pure joy in a perfect world of bliss where every wrong will be made right, every tear wiped away.

There will be no more poverty and oppression, no more inequality, all, every single one who will be there, joint heirs with Christ the Son.

So what does all this mean for the Christian pursuing justice in the world? It first of all means that we entrust God with the final outcome.

That's the great story of the Christian hope of final justice. Secularism cannot give you that. It's got this world now as its final hope.

[28 : 52] That's it. And so we work patiently knowing that this God will eventually make everything right in the end.

That is ultimately hope for the weary justice warrior in our world. Also, belief in the story of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, what it does for the Christian, it breaks the cycle of which the oppressed become oppressors in their turn.

in the Old Testament, the Israelites are constantly warned, constantly warned, not to oppress immigrants and racial outsiders amongst them and around them.

Why? Because remember, you too were foreigners in Egypt. In other words, remember your salvation. So Leviticus 19, 33, 34 makes that really clear.

the memory of their salvation from slavery by God's grace was to radically undermine their natural human inclination for domination over others.

[30 : 10] But it's at the cross where Jesus Christ is crucified that the cycle of the oppressing becoming oppressors is totally broken. in Jesus, God radically identified with the poor and the oppressed.

He was born into a poor family. He lived among the marginalized and the outcast. His trial was a miscarriage of justice.

He died violently, naked, and penniless. that is, the Son of God himself knew, experienced what it was like to be the victim of injustice, to stand up to a corrupt system and to be killed by it.

And the Christian faith, central in the Christian faith, is that we know that he did that to make an atonement for our sins to set us free from the just penalty for us living our lives, suppressing the allegiance and love that we owe God.

Christians know that in the eyes of God, we are spiritually poor, that we are spiritually powerless. like the oppressed of this world, we are spiritually outcasts, we are slaves, but God saved us by becoming oppressed for us.

[31 : 55] Now, it is true, it is true that claiming universal moral truths like the Christian faith, Jesus says, I am the only way, the truth and the life, that claims like that historically have led to oppression of others.

That is true. But what if the universal truth is a man who died for his enemies, who did not respond in violence, respond to violence with violence, but in fact forgave his enemies, what if that's the ultimate, moral, absolute, universal truth?

At the very least, what that means is that if you call yourself a Christian, you profess to be Christian and aligned to Jesus, if you are not committed to a life of radical generosity, if you're not committed to a life of justice towards the poor and the marginalized, at the very least, it means you're living contradiction to the good news of Jesus Christ.

It means at least that. You're a living contradiction. You see, the cross of Jesus Christ breaks the cycle of oppression in every single way.

In every single way. life. As I mentioned earlier, people who are passionate for justice are in danger of becoming self-righteous and cruel in their pursuit of justice, particularly when they're confronted with other people who they perceive to be oppressors of others.

[33 : 51] On the other hand, the Christian life stands with the understanding and hear me say this, this is not meant for shock factor, the Christian life starts with the understanding that you are an oppressor.

You are an oppressor. The Christian life begins by confessing that you have in fact suppressed God.

God. You've wronged him. In every possible way in your life, you've wronged him. And you have wronged others who are made in his image.

church. We have not loved and honoured our neighbours as we wish to be treated ourselves. In other words, every Christian who understands the gospel admits that he or she has been an oppressor of God and neighbour.

are. When we lie, we deprive people of the truth that they have a right to.

[35 : 08] When we break our promises, we deprive people of the goods that they have a right to. If we are not poor and we choose to close our hearts to those who are, we deprive them of the sustenance they have a right to.

I could just go on and on and on and on and on. Christians know that they have hearts of oppressors and yet they have been saved by grace nonetheless.

Saved by grace. And so when they confront an oppressor, it is possible to do it with a steely and a courageous determination.

But the gospel also teaches them to do it without self-righteousness and without anger, without sarcasm, without passive aggressiveness.

that is, the Christian because of the gospel cannot possibly hate the haters.

[36 : 31] They cannot possibly oppress the oppressors. And I think Dr. King really embraced that in the 1960s.

and as a multi-ethnic church, to the degree that we see Jesus oppressed for us, the oppressors, so that God embraces us in him forever and we serve each other, we will serve each other and we will seek the welfare of each other.

I'm convinced the more we see Jesus oppressed for the oppressors, to enable to set us free by his grace, the more that we live out that relationship amongst us as ourselves as a church, our society will in fact see that the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ is plausible, is relevant, and it is good.

Amen.