

Biblical Justice:  
Finding Jesus in the “Face” of Justice  
Matthew 25:31-46

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Matthew 25:31-46 (NIV)

<sup>31</sup>“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. <sup>32</sup>All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. <sup>33</sup>He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

<sup>34</sup>“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. <sup>35</sup>For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, <sup>36</sup>I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’

<sup>37</sup>“Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? <sup>38</sup>When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? <sup>39</sup>When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

<sup>40</sup>“The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’

<sup>41</sup>“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. <sup>42</sup>For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, <sup>43</sup>I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’

<sup>44</sup>“They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’

<sup>45</sup>“He will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’ <sup>46</sup>“Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

Today we conclude a series of messages (8 weeks) on the topic of “Biblical Justice”. I do not know about you, but I have been stretched and challenged in my understanding of this topic, particularly as I consider our present context and the events that have transpired this year:

- The Covid19 pandemic and all of its implications and impacts, particularly on our black and brown neighbors who have suffered in greater proportion, due to more preexisting conditions and less access to healthcare.
- Its economic impacts may continue for years as millions are out of work, numerous businesses have closed permanently, pushing millions into poverty. Its negative mental health impacts due to the necessary social isolation. (Not to mention similar impacts globally.)
- The number of police shootings of Black Americans and the massive protests which followed the death George Floyd. These highlighted longstanding issues of systemic racism, inequity in education, etc.
- The unprecedented impacts of climate change: drought and devastating, widespread wildfires in the Western US, and an increased number and ferocity of hurricanes in the Gulf, for starters.
- The tone, content, and divisiveness of political discourse during this election year.

So how does Biblical Justice speak into these issues that confront us each day? We have dug deep into the meaning of three Hebrew words which are essential to our understanding of biblical justice. They are integrally related, like facets of a beautiful diamond. Each one relates to the other and contributes to our understanding of the whole.

The first, is **“hesed”**. This word is variously translated as “loving-kindness” “mercy”, “compassion”. This is a word that describes the very heart of God for us and for all God’s creation. (It occurs 177 times in the OT. See Psalm 136.)

The second word that is essential to our understanding of biblical justice is **“mishpat”**, which occurs more than 200x in the OT. In Micah 6:8 (NIV) it is translated this way: “He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To *act justly* (or “to do justice”/**mishpat**) and to love mercy (**hesed!**) and to walk humbly with your God.”

Here, the emphasis of **mishpat** is an action—to **act** justly. When paired with **hesed**, the emphasis of “just action” is motivated by “lovingkindness or mercy”/**hesed!** (also see Leviticus (24:22). Additionally, **mishpat is justice that treats all people equitably, as well as “giving people their rights” or “their due” - be that punishment, protection, or care.**

**And the third Hebrew word, *tzadeqah*, means righteousness, right-relatedness, or doing the right thing. All three of these concepts are repeatedly linked in scripture to the vulnerable, and all three reflect the heart of God toward humanity.**

This particular passage is Jesus' last sermon in Matthew's gospel and its focus is the judgement of all nations. Yes, all of us will be held accountable for our actions or inactions. That is the bad news. The good news? You and I know the Judge: Jesus!

The context for judgement is entrance into God's Kingdom; the King and Judge – Jesus - is separating the "sheep" from the "goats". What differentiates the two groups? They are two different animals (no pun intended!).

What differentiates the sheep from the goats is their behavior with respect to the vulnerable groups of people we have encountered throughout our study: the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger/newcomer, those poorly clothed, the sick, the imprisoned. These are the ones who are especially close to God's heart.

When preparing to move from grad school in southern California to our first church in northern California, I went to the grocery store. I was on a mission: to find cardboard boxes for the move and pick up milk. Before going into the store, I walked down the loading ramp to the two huge dumpsters. They were so tall that I could not see into them unless standing on tiptoe, and then barely. As I approached the first dumpster, I could hear something rummaging around inside the first dumpster and assumed it was a dog.

I was dumfounded to see that inside the bin, her back to me, was a little gray-haired woman! I had approached quietly, and I was afraid to startle her...in that moment I froze...

Yes, what we **do** matters. But what Jesus **did** on the cross, matters more. That is to say, the Bible clearly teaches that we are saved purely by grace, not by our "doing" the right thing!

<sup>8</sup>For it is **by grace** you have been saved, through faith - and **this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - <sup>9</sup>not by works**, so that no one can boast. <sup>10</sup>*For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*"  
Ephesians 2:8-10 NIV

Therefore, having experienced the amazing grace of God in our lives, we are motivated to act in ways that bestow that same grace on others. “Doing the right thing” is an expression of our love and gratitude to God, and of our discipleship. (Ephesians 2:10!)

There are a few surprises in the story Jesus tells.

The ‘sheep’ are NOT those we might expect: NOT regular synagogue or churchgoers. They are NOT the social workers or the wealthy or the powerful or the food bank volunteers. In fact, when their names are called, they are not aware of having done anything that would set them apart or earn them brownie points with Jesus the Judge and King! They have done all the “right” (righteous) things but have done so *in a totally unselfconscious way*.

In fact, they question Jesus: <sup>37</sup>“... ‘Lord, when did we **see you** hungry and feed **you**, or thirsty and give **you** something to drink? <sup>38</sup>When did we **see you** a stranger and invite **you** in, or needing clothes and clothe **you**? <sup>39</sup>When did we **see you** sick or in prison and go to visit **you**?’

*They have **no** recollection of “seeing Jesus”!* It seems they have treated every person they encountered, with graceful equanimity.

Jesus responds: *‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for **one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.**’* (v.40)

On the other hand, the “goats” are asking the same questions as the “sheep”. **“When did we see you, Jesus??”** They failed to recognize Jesus in the faces of the vulnerable who crossed their path. Then, having failed **to see**, they failed to act on behalf of the “least of these”.

**I wonder if the difference between the sheep and the goats has mainly to do with their ability to “see” Jesus.** The Bible teaches that every person - regardless of age, gender, race, religion, social status - is made in the image of God. When we live into our calling as disciples to “do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God”, we will demonstrate our family resemblance. **We will “look like Jesus” and others will recognize Christ in us...and we will recognize Christ in others, particularly in “the least of these” vulnerable people in our midst.**

Remember my dumpster diving story? I am not proud to say...I turned around and went into the store. But ashamed, I had second thoughts. I returned to the dumpster, but she was gone! Hoping that she had been on foot, I jumped in my car and drove up and down the streets adjacent to the grocery store. She was nowhere to be seen.

It was a teachable moment...I realized I had missed an opportunity to "do right" -to do justice - to see the face of Christ on another, and for her to see Christ in me. I vowed at that moment; I would never let that happen again.

Francis of Assisi was born to a wealthy aristocratic family, but renounced everything, to follow Christ. The story is told of how, while out riding he encountered a leper with an advanced case of the disease, he was quite disfigured. Moved by compassion, Francis dismounted and embraced the man. In that moment, the face of the leper transformed into the face of Christ!

A similar story is told of St. Martin, who was both a Roman soldier and a Christian. On a cold winter day, he was approached by a beggar at the city gate. Martin had no money, but he gave what he had. He took his cloak, managed to cut it in half, and drape one half of it around the shoulders of the shivering man. That night, Martin had a dream in which he saw Jesus in heaven, wearing half of a soldier's cloak. An angel asked Jesus: "Why are you wearing that worn out cloak?" Jesus replied: "My servant Martin gave it to me."

John Fisher composed numerous Christian songs that were popular in my youth. The lyrics to one has stayed with me.

Have you seen Jesus my Lord?  
He's here in plain view.  
Take a look, open your eyes.  
He'll show him to you.

Have you ever stood at the cross  
With a man hanging in pain?  
Seen the look of love in his eyes  
Then I say, you've seen Jesus my Lord.

Have you ever stood in the family  
With the Lord there in your midst?

Seen the face of Christ on your brother or sister?  
Then I say, you've seen Jesus my Lord.

Biblical Justice would ask of us: Have you seen the face of Christ on your neighbor? On a stranger? On a man or woman holding a sign at the intersection, or a dumpster diving woman? Have you seen the face of Christ on an orphaned child or widow? On an immigrant who speaks little English?

Biblical justice has its reward now (and on the judgement day) when we act in loving compassion on behalf of the most vulnerable.

Have **you** seen Jesus my Lord? He is here in plain view...Take a look...open your eyes!  
Jesus, reveal Yourself to me, and to each of you!

Pray with me...

Christ has no body but yours and mine,  
No hands, no feet on earth, but ours.  
Ours are the eyes with which he looks with  
Compassion on this world.  
Ours are the feet with which he walks to do good,  
Ours are the hands, with which he blesses the world.

Ours are the hands, ours are the feet,  
Ours are the eyes, we are his body.  
Christ has no body but ours,  
No hands, no feet on earth but ours,  
Ours are the eyes with which he looks with compassion on this world.  
Christ has no body now on earth, but ours.\*

Lord give us eyes to see you in the face of the vulnerable,  
And may all see Christ in each one of us.  
Indeed, make us more and more like Jesus,  
In whose name we pray, Amen

\*Prayer written by St. Teresa of Avila (1515-1582)  
(I altered pronouns from singular to plural)