

God's Justice

Justice in its most basic definition is giving to others what is their due. The problem is that our concept of what each person is due varies tremendously from what God's image entails. God's grace is such that we are all equally precious in his sight. We are all due divine love. Human nature dictates otherwise. We feel that if we work harder and longer, we deserve more reward. We feel that if we are better behaved than others, we deserve more reward. In the parable of The Workers in the Vineyard (Matthew 20: 1-16), those that began their work at the beginning of the day were paid the same amount as those who started at the end of the day. They grumbled saying, "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day in the scorching heat." The owner of the vineyard replies, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you, and go; I choose to give to this last as I give to you. Or am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or is your eye evil because I am good?" Jesus concludes, "So the last will be first, and the first last." In the grace-filled eyes of God we are all equal. In the above parable, all of the workers are paid one Denarius, the usual daily wage, which would allow them to feed their families. The workers who started late in the day were paid the same amount as those who had started earlier because the owner of the vineyard realized that they too needed to feed their families. Earlier in Jesus' ministry, James, John, and Peter seek special rewards in the "kingdom of God" because of their early service and devotion to Jesus. Framing the parable within this context, Jesus demonstrates that God's grace extends to all who come to be reconciled, whether that is early or late. Nobody gets a greater portion of God's love. Not the disciples for following Jesus. Not the Pharisees for following the letter of the law. Not

the eldest son in the prodigal son story for his dedication to his father. Not the Jews over the Gentiles. And in today's world, not good, churchgoing people over those who don't attend. God's love and mercy extends to all persons, regardless of their prior commitment to him, or lack of it. The deathbed convert is blessed with as much love as the lifelong disciple, just as the criminal hanging on a cross next to Jesus was accepted with joy.

We don't understand God's idea of justice. When we see a criminal, we look for punishment, retaliation, or revenge. When Jesus sees a criminal, he sees a child of God who is terribly lost. He looks for repentance, conversion, and transformation. Maya Angelou expresses this sentiment in her book *Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now*:

While I know myself as a creation of God, I am also obliged to realize and remember that everyone else and everything else are also God's creation. This is particularly difficult for me when my mind falls upon the cruel person, the batterer, and the bigot. I would like to think that the mean-spirited were created by another force and under the aegis and direction of something other than my God. But since I believe that God created all things, I am not only constrained to know that the oppressor is a child of God, but also obliged to try to treat him or her as a child of God.

We just can't relate to the profound mercy and forgiveness shown by Jesus. If Matthew, the tax collector, had taken your life's earnings and forced you to sell your home in order to feed your children, you would be incensed. Your idea of justice would include arrest, prosecution, and punishment. But God had other ideas. Jesus offered Matthew acceptance, offered him a new life based on love. Matthew transformed into a generous soul, ultimately giving himself to the service of others. As a disciple of Jesus he now would enrich the poor and sustain the needy. Jesus' actions for Matthew accomplished God's justice, which provides for his love being distributed to the most people. Again, God is not particularly interested in punishment. If he were, we'd all be in a "heap of trouble".

I learned a lesson about God's justice in the winter of 2005. Pastor Mary, from my church, told me the story of a young man, Paul, who broke into her house. Paul had been casing houses in the neighborhood and eventually zeroed in on Pastor Mary's house. While Mary was sleeping, Paul broke into the house and stole various items. Mary heard a door alarm beep and simply assumed that she had failed to close a door. But as she tried to open the door leading into the garage, it would not move. After a minute or two, it became apparent that someone was in the garage. "Is someone in there?" she yelled. There was no response, but it became clear that someone ran out of the garage. It wasn't long before the police caught Paul. It turns out that Paul was 19. In talking to his mother, Louise, Pastor Mary learned that Paul suffered from depression and drug addiction. Louise was distraught. Her son had never done anything like this before. She had tried to get him help, but finances limited them. Mary recalled other teens she had known who needed a second chance after getting into drugs in high school. She understood that punishment or retaliation could forever send Paul down the wrong path. She understood that his only chance for transformation might be an act of compassion and grace. Mary asked Louise whether she had a church family to help support her and her son. She didn't, so Mary did one of the few things that she was able to do. She offered to bring Louise into our church family. She made a prayer shawl for Paul and Louise to let them know that our church would have people praying for them and willing to help them. Louise found a six-month drug treatment program for Paul. I don't know what became of Paul, but I do know this; he will have experienced grace in his life and grace can perform miracles never achieved by punishment.

Jesus was serious when He said, "Love your enemy." During the years of Jesus' ministry, Rome ruled. The governor Pontius Pilate was noted for his tyranny. He would not hesitate to

crucify those who challenged Roman rule. Herod Antipas collaborated with Imperial Roman rule as did the chief priests of the temple in Jerusalem. Justice, by human standards, would dictate that Jesus rise up in defiance of this regime, yet we do not see this in Jesus. In his prescient divinity, He knew that violence begets violence. He taught that love is the only mechanism for transformation. Rome, who lived by the sword, would ultimately die by the sword. We only have ruins to remind us of the vast Roman Empire. On the other hand, the love and compassion found within the early Christian church catapulted it into a worldwide faith for billions. Justice was not found through war. It was found through sacrificial love.

As Christians, striving to follow Jesus, we become less concerned about the punishment of evil people. In God's eyes, there are no evil people, only evil acts. In the Old Testament, it appears that God is very interested in punishing the wicked, but he never punishes those who repent and accept his mercy. Jesus' teachings, on the other hand, are very clear in telling us not to judge others. We are not to, "remove the speck from our brother's eye while we have a plank in our own." We are not to pull the "weeds among the wheat". Jesus does teach that there will be judgment: "The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all obstacles to faith in those who commit lawlessness, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire; at that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let whoever has ears listen." (Matthew 13:41-43) In view of his other teachings, however, it is clear that God will do everything within his power to reclaim every lost soul. If we are not in eternal relationship with him, it will be of our choosing, not his.

Does this mean society should let crime run rampant, that we should not punish criminals? No, living in a loving and nurturing community is contingent on a safe environment. God certainly is not intent on allowing violence or destruction. People who cannot safely function within society must be separated. We should not, however, give up on them. Be sure, God has not. Prison ministry is a vital component of God's mission to reclaim his people, even those who we consider incorrigible.

From God's perspective, a just world is one in which we care about each other with the same passion we care for ourselves. This requires a redirecting of our focus from "me" as an individual to "us" as a community. It is clear that God's sense of justice includes providing for the impoverished and vulnerable. A just world does not mean that everybody has the same, but at least, everyone has enough food, clothing, shelter, and basic health care. In his parable of The Final Judgment (Matthew 25:31-46), Jesus makes it clear that we are accountable for providing his love to those in need. The vast majority of his ministry focused on social justice. As his agents in the world, we can devote more of our talent, time, and financial resources to the pursuit of this mission. We can direct the focus of our church towards social service ministry. We can share a passion for service with our children. Do our children really need to be involved in self-centered activities nonstop? Can we engage them in service ministry, not once or twice a year, but on a regular basis?