

Profound Responsibility

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[0 : 00] Amen. So, I invite you tonight to go on a thought experiment with me.

Let's imagine that there is, this is a weird way to start a sermon, but let's imagine there's no God. Let's imagine there's no intelligent design, there's no beautiful mind behind all of reality.

Now, if that's the case, then humans can't be made in the image of God because there's no God to image. Instead then humans would have had to have evolved, merely evolved by chance from some clump of cells with me so far.

It's not that far fetched for many, many people. Now, in this thought experiment, if we believe that, let me ask, how do human beings have value and dignity?

Where does their value and dignity come from? Well, at bottom, we would just be another kind of beast, right?

[1 : 10] We would just be another more highly evolved animal with more capabilities for rationality, etc.

In that worldview, society inevitably must, to be logically consistent, degrade into the claim that human value and dignity is based on really just two things, capacity and function.

Where would that leave us? If human value is based on capacity and function, what do we do with humans that have low capacity? Humans without certain mental capabilities, physical capabilities, humans who are inconvenient to the rest of us, they have no rights because they have no value anymore.

They have no inherent value, no inherent dignity, only the strong, the capable, the useful, those people would have rights. But the unborn, the mentally disabled, the learning disadvantaged, those with dementia, etc.

What would happen to their rights, their values? At rock bottom, I'm not trying to be reductionistic, but that would be a consistent end to the beginning of that premise, right?

[2 : 42] G.K. Chesterton said about this idea, he said, as a politician, the secular person will cry out that all war is a waste of life, and then as a philosopher admit that all life is a waste of time.

The secular person goes first to a political meeting where he complains the natives are being treated as if they were beasts. Then he goes to a scientific meeting where he proves that all human beings are actually beasts.

The secular worldview gives us no basis for justice, no basis for human rights. But let's be fair, right now in this world, if you look into the secular society, you will see a lot of those thoughts, but you'll find out that a lot of the younger generations especially have this deep-rooted passion for justice and human rights, don't they?

They're marked by compassion. It's actually quite beautiful. But there's a sense of confusion in the air.

There's not a consistency with the way they work out their worldview. Take for instance, J.K. Rowling, right? She's praised and loved one minute, and the next minute she's just thrown under the bus, because she said a man should be a man and a woman should be a woman, and so she's called transphobic and she's canceled.

[4 : 14] There's a sense of confusion in the air. Society tells us that we should... Society says abortion is healthcare.

And then how do the other side of their mouth advocates proudly for the rights of the overlooked in society? Do you see the inconsistencies?

I mean, which will it be? You can't have it both ways. Doesn't it make you want a better way? Doesn't it make you want something that makes sense of it all, a truth that brings this together, that gives those impulses that we have for justice, for generosity, for compassion, that grounds them in the truth that we're created.

Now, for the last few weeks, we've been looking at this doctrine, this teaching on the image of God found in Genesis 1 and then again where we read it in Genesis 9.

The image of God. So the image of God and justice is what we're talking about tonight. Martin Luther King, Jr. summed up the implications of this teaching nicely. He said, there are no gradations in the image of God.

[5 : 29] Every person from a treble white to a base black is significant on God's keyboard, precisely because every man is made in the image of God.

So what I want to show you tonight is how the truth that humans were made in God's image radically shaped justice and human rights for God's people in the Old Testament. I want to show you that the Imago dei, the image of God teaching raised the bar on justice.

As an example, let me talk about the ox that gores people. This is a weird Old Testament text. Maybe you've read this. So the Old Testament, in one portion of the Old Testament says, if you've got this ox that gores somebody, right, it accidentally kills somebody, here's what to do in that scenario gives this law code for how to handle that.

Now there's another ancient law code that we've discovered years back called the Code of Hammurabi, which you've probably heard about. And the Code of Hammurabi has the same example and gives its law code for that as well.

So the Code of Hammurabi says, if an ox accidentally gores a person, let's just say, sorry, it's no consequence.

[6 : 42] The Old Testament, it says you kill the ox, right? Man is made in the image of God. So like Genesis 9 said, there will be a reckoning for the lifeblood of man. So Hammurabi, the ox is free.

Old Testament, the ox dies. But what if that ox is in the habit of goering people? What if this is its 11th time? The Code of Hammurabi says, we'll find them, you know, 50 quid or something, right?

It's a modest fine. The Old Testament says the ox and the owner must die. That's serious, right? It might sound harsh, but do you see what has happened?

God has raised the bar on justice because the image of God raises the bar on human value.

So I want to show us this evening how the gospel transforms us into people who practice the image of God by pursuing justice because being made in the image of God is something we are and it's something we do.

[7 : 47] So we're going to focus on both of those aspects tonight. To do that, three points. The shape of biblical justice, the surprising mission of Jesus and the power of God at work.

So number one, the shape of biblical justice. Now there are two basic kinds of justice in the Old Testament at least. There's the retributive justice, right? If this happens, how do you kind of get revenge almost?

It's not revenge, but you know what I mean, right? Like the goring of the ox would be an example. Then there's restorative justice and restorative justice is what the bulk of the Old Testament talks about when it talks about justice.

And so that's what we're going to focus on tonight. And we can sum up restorative justice, I think with just three little words. Lift the lowly.

Lift the lowly. Now when God executes this restorative justice, he humbles the self-exalted. So people who raise themselves up, he lowers them.

[8 : 44] But the lowly and oppressed, he lifts up. And then God invites us to seek restorative justice. He continually tells us to be lifters of the lowly, to be a voice for the voiceless defenders of the weak.

So let's look at Proverbs 31, 8, 9 again, and that's where we're going to work out of for the next little while. Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute.

Open your mouth, judge righteously. Defend the rights of the poor and needy. Now, this portion of Proverbs was written by King Lemuel.

I don't really know very much about him other than that his mom taught him these Proverbs. That's how the beginning of Proverbs 31 starts. So if you know a mother in the United States today's Mother's Day, that's my Mother's Day nod for the U.S.

And King Lemuel makes it clear that what he's saying here is about justice. Do you see the words in verse 9, judge righteously? In other words, open your mouth. That is to say, judge righteously.

[9 : 50] When he's talking about being a voice for the voiceless, for defending the rights of the poor and needy, he says, what's at stake here is justice. This is what biblical justice is.

So let's look at verse 8, the first verse on the screen there, those first two parallel lines. Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute. Now a more literal reading of the Hebrew might say, for the rights of the sons of the past over.

The sons of the past over. That's true, isn't it? The past over, the overlooked, the destitute, they have no voice.

I was in a seminar recently on poverty for church workers and ministers. And in that seminar, the person leading the seminar asked all of us participants, he said, how would you define poverty?

And there were lots of good answers, like not having enough resources to meet the demands that you face and so on. But then it was almost a trick question, because then he said, we actually asked people who are in poverty how they define poverty, and do you know what they said?

[11 : 01] They said, we have no voice. We are unrepresented in the world. No representation in the public square.

No ability to stand up and defend themselves. That's what it means to be poor. Biblical justice says the overlooked and the destitute are precious.

They're valuable citizens. They're valuable because they're made in the image of God. And they don't have a voice, so you be their voice.

They are not represented in the public square, so you stand up for them in the public square. Look at verse nine.

Open your mouth. Judge righteously. Defend the rights of the poor and needy. Defend the rights of the poor and needy.

[11 : 57] That was a foreign idea in the time of the Old Testament. All these other ancient law codes, the way that the other cultures around Israel treated their poor and needy, it was, if you were a wealthy person, if you were a landowner, if you were a freeman, you had rights.

You had tons of rights. If you were poor, nothing. Do you see human value for them was based on capacity and function, just like in our thought experiment.

But the Old Testament, God, in his word, he gives laws to his people, and in his law, he says, actually, the poor and needy have the same rights as the wealthy.

That was radical. We have no category for how otherworldly and countercultural that would have been in the time of the Old Testament.

God even built into Israel's laws some radical kind of social justice projects to defend the rights of the poor and needy. So for instance, you guys are familiar with the Gleaners' Law, right?

[13 : 08] If you have a field and you pass through it and kind of glean your harvest, God says, don't go through it twice to pick up all the scraps. Leave it. You're not the poor in your community who could really use those, right?

So the Gleaners' Rights. Another one would be the Year of Jubilee. Every 50 years, all the Israelites who had gone into slavery because of debt are freed with no conditions.

And everything they've ever lost, all their ancestral land is returned to them. All debts are wiped. Can you imagine every 50 years having all of your student loans and credit card debt just wiped clean?

Unbelievable. That existed to teach us something about the nature of the kingdom of God, but to lift the lowly, to create a land where oppression was against the grain, not going with the grain.

So God is teaching us through the proverb of King Lemuel's mom that biblical justice is giving the poor and voiceless their due as image-bearers of God by speaking for them, defending their rights.

[14 : 23] If this seems new to you, if you associate the word justice in the Old Testament more with wrath, anger, and judgment like punishment, there is that side of it.

But this is the overwhelming majority. Let me give you just a few examples that have this same flavor. Isaiah 1, God says, cease to do evil, learn to do good, seek justice, correct oppression, bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause.

Micah 6, He has told you, oh man, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God.

Jeremiah 22, thus says the Lord, do justice and righteousness and deliver from the hand of the oppressor, him who has been robbed, and do no wrong or violence to the resident alien, the fatherless and the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place.

It's everywhere in the Old Testament. It's marvelous because God made us in His image. So we all have value. We all have dignity. And He wants us all to practice being in His image by lifting the lowly, giving voice to the voiceless, freeing the oppressed.

[15 : 47] So we're all, in Martin Luther King Jr.'s words, significant notes on God's keyboard. And God wants to play a beautiful melody in this world through the way that we treat each other.

But the Old Testament is a story of how God gave His people the sheet music and they played the wrong tune over and over again.

God gave them the law. It was a wonderful law. It raised the bar so high on how people are to treat each other. Amazing. It showed something of the character and goodness of God.

And they just disregarded it time and again. Israel and Judah failed to do justice.

And so, of course, most of these passages about justice are actually located in the prophets, in the books of the prophets, the part of the Old Testament where God's prophets are sent to confront Israel and Judah, to confront God's people with God's word and say, you're not worshiping God.

[16 : 53] You're not. They did not move in the direction of beautifully imaging God by being the voice of the voiceless. Instead they looked like all the other nations.

All the law codes that were based on capacity and function. They were oppressors rather than liberators. They were the overlookers instead of the defenders of the overlooked.

The self-exalting rather than the lifters of the lowly. And isn't that just like us humans? Israel's story isn't recorded for us to point and say, ah, they were so bad at this, but we've got our stuff together.

It's a mirror. We're supposed to see our own failures in their failures. Now usually when God spoke to his people and confronted them about justice, he said something like this.

The guys are way off track, but listen, I don't want your sacrifices. I just want you to do justice.

[17 : 55] Do you see what Israel was doing? It's what we all tend to do. We replace justice with religiosity. We think, you're right God, I have not done a good job of doing justice.

I've not loved my neighbor well. I've not been doing mercy in the world around me, but I'll go to church more often and I'll have more quiet times.

I'll pray more fervently. In Isaiah chapter one, God actually says that when we try to replace doing justice with sacrifice and worship and religiosity, well, here's what he says starting in verse 14, your new moons and your appointed feasts, this is God speaking.

He says, your new moons, your appointed feasts, my soul hates. They have become a burden to me. I am weary of bearing them.

When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you. That's terrifying. Even though you make many prayers, I will not listen.

[19 : 03] Your hands are full of blood. When we replace doing what God has told us to do with trying to do the religious song and dance, God detests it.

I mean, don't you see why? This is serious indictment with serious consequences, but that leads us to point two, the surprising mission of Jesus.

So Israel had this terrible track record of doing justice, but there was one moment in history, one pivot point, one little just minute where the pursuit of justice and human rights just exploded onto the scene and it never stopped.

And that moment was, it all started one day when Jesus was in the synagogue as he was prone to do, and someone handed him the scroll and asked him to read. So he unrolled the scroll to the book of Isaiah and he read this, the spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

[20 : 33] And then he just sits down like a mic drop from Jesus because he's saying, that's me. And that day is today, that year of the Lord's favor is this moment where the kingdom of God breaks in to the world.

It's the year of Jubilee. And that's how Jesus understood his own mission. If you were to ask him, you know, 2000 years ago, hey, Jesus of Nazareth, what's the reason why you're here?

He would have said that. To bring good news to the poor. The poor get good news, the captives get set free, the blind get their sight back, the oppressed are liberated, and it's the year of Jubilee.

Now let's notice something about this though. When Jesus is quoting this from Isaiah about himself, that passage does not treat us like rebels. Jesus doesn't center his mission on the fact that we've rebelled against his rule.

He doesn't treat us as rebels, he treats us as the poor and the needy and the oppressed. And isn't that kind?

[21 : 51] He looks at us and he sees broken mirrors reflecting a warped picture of God back to the broken world. And his mission is to renovate us.

He looks at us and sees slaves in debt, bent double under heavy burdens. And he says, Matthew 11, 28, come to me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

Jesus's life and mission was the penultimate expression of justice, true justice. Because the only rightfully exalted person in the whole universe humbled himself to lift the lowly and undeserving.

That's what God calls justice. That's Jesus dying for our sins, paying for our debts. We are the recipients of God's justice.

We'll never begin to do justice and love mercy and walk humbly with our God in this world until we get that we've received God's justice.

[23 : 03] And the gospel is, you know, when people, especially in the United States, we talk about kind of the social justice idea, we talk about redistribution of wealth, right? This is not a political statement I'm about to make.

The gospel is the ultimate example of redistribution of wealth, because the one who has everything, the richest person in the world, in the universe, became poor and made you an inheritor of his kingdom.

How's that for a redistribution? And he bore our sins so that we could stand in his righteousness. And that's the gospel. And that's what Paul calls, Paul says the gospel is the power of God, power of God, which leads us to the final point, because I said I wanted to talk about how the gospel transforms us into being able to practice the image of God.

And for that transformation, we need power. It was the gospel at work in the early church that changed everything for justice and human rights.

If the doctrine of the image of God is the sheet music to God's song of justice, then the gospel is the moment when the divine maestro sits down at the keyboard to play.

[24 : 20] And he plays the right tune. So let's think about another image. Imagine a lamp, like just a floor lamp, and it's not plugged in.

That lamp is the doctrine of the image of God. The image of God is like a lamp. The gospel is plugging that lamp into the wall. It's the thing that makes it be able to do what it was made to do.

Maybe that image, where the lamp. You get my point, right? The only way we can shine and practice glorifying God by imaging him in this world is if we are plugged into that source of power, that is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

So the gospel is the power of God surging through the people of God by the spirit of God for the glory of God. That's what this is about.

Let's take a brief tour then through history, post-resurrection of Jesus to see what I'm talking about. So in the time of Jesus, in the Roman Empire, here's what things were like.

[25 : 23] It was dismal. The husbands and wives had a miserable relationship. Husbands were allowed to sleep with whomever they wanted, and wives had to remain faithful to their husbands because women had very little value in society.

Because men were more valued than women, it was incredibly common, disgustingly common, that if you were pregnant and you had a baby and it was a girl that you would abandon this baby girl to die in the elements.

Brutal abortions were commonplace. Sex trafficking was rampant. If you were a widow or an orphan and had no family to care for you, you were just destined to die quickly.

And if you were poor, you were likely to end up in slavery just to survive. Slavery for the rest of your life, no jubilee to get out of that one.

But here's what the gospel did to that culture. The gospel came, and let's think about women. The gospel gave unbelievable value to women, unbelievable value.

[26 : 32] So Jesus shows this in all four of the gospels. It's women who get to be the first witnesses of his resurrection. I was just thinking about this today. In the Gospel of John chapter 20, there's a brief moment where the church on earth is Mary Magdalene.

Do you ever think of that? The whole church, the whole church who has encountered the risen Christ is one woman. And she was given the great privilege by Jesus to go and evangelize the apostles.

That is incredibly, no Roman untransformed by the gospel of Jesus would ever write that.

The early church vehemently opposed abortion, and not just in principle they did something about it. They were known, churches all over the Roman Empire were known for going to places that babies tend to be exposed and rescuing them.

They adopted orphans. One of the noblest charges of the apostles to the early church, we see this in James, right? He says, true religion is this, care for the widows and the orphans.

[27 : 41] No other religion was saying that. The church took upon itself the role of feeding and caring for the poor. There was no welfare. There was no government aid at all.

It was only the church's job. You can see that in Acts chapter 6, they talk about the distribution. Because as the church community began to grow in Jerusalem, the poor and the needy realized, here's one place that we can go.

And because of what they believe, they want to help us. This is unbelievable. The church was the only source of caring for the poor and needy.

And government assistance for the poor was only institutionalized when Emperor Constantine of Rome became a Christian. The first hospitals that cared for any and all sick were based on Christian principles because humans are made in the image of God and all have value, dignity and a right to life.

Universities based on Christian principles because image-bearers of God should have the privilege and opportunity to learn, to be educated.

[28 : 53] The British slave trade was abolished because William Wilberforce believed in the doctrine of the image of God and was transformed by the gospel to do something about it that all humans had dignity and value.

And the American civil rights movement was absolutely founded on and driven by this doctrine and this gospel. That's just a taster.

For centuries, these precious words from the prophet Amos has been the church's prayer. Amos 524, let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

I hope you see that this beautiful melody, this song of justice, can only be played in this world by the power of God. So Jesus, the perfect image of God, the one who is and does the image of God perfectly, invites us to become made more and more in his image as we practice the image of God by the power of God, seeking justice for those around us.

Where can you lift the lowly in your life? Who do you know who's unrepresented, who doesn't have a voice? Now, there's kind of two things I want to say just in brief and closing.

[30 : 25] There are a lot of movements of justice in the world around us today. Everybody is calling for justice all over the place, loudly.

And they really are movements. But here's what I want to say to the church is you need not join the movements to still be seeking biblical justice, but you must not dismiss them because that impulse is from God.

And it doesn't mean it's consistent and logical and it doesn't mean it's carried out perfectly or right and it doesn't mean you need to jump on board with their method of achieving justice, but we can't be dismissive.

We can't roll our eyes. Justice is God's idea. And it's at the very heart of the gospel. We are the lowly who have been lifted by Christ.

Now, the last thing I want to say is this. Justice is not just sending us out on a mission of justice while he kind of sits in the back directing.

[31 : 32] Jesus himself is on a mission of justice. He is actively ruling and reigning his universe right now from the throne and everything is going his way. So he is inviting us not to go out and do his work, but to go out and join him in the work he's already doing, which when facing the uphill kind of battle in front of us, how difficult it can seem to pursue justice in this broken world, that's a comfort that we need.

In the Great Commission, Jesus begins by saying, all authority in heaven and earth has been given to me and ends by saying, behold, I will be with you always.

We need the presence of God to do his work and his way. So he's already doing the work and justice has begun to roll down like water. One day it will flow like a mighty river into eternity.

All wrongs will be righted, no more oppression, no more injustice. And every one of us, those of us who have hurt people and been hurt by people, those of us who have been the oppressor in some way or who have been pushed down and silenced all of our lives.

Every one of us will look at the risen Jesus with the holes from the nails that held him to the cross in his hand, and we will be looking at the face of justice and we will say, I am satisfied.

[33 : 04] Justice has been done. May God help us to live like that's true. Let me pray for us.

Lord Jesus, we praise you. We love you for what you've done for us when we just did nothing to deserve it.

The distance you had to come from eternal Son of God enjoying the love and unity and fellowship within the Godhead for all eternity down into human flesh to suffer.

And not just to suffer physically, but to bear the weight of the world's sins on that cross bearing the wrath of God for us, it staggers our minds, but not enough.

Lord, would you set our hearts on fire with love for you because of what you've done for us and because of how just you are?

[34 : 28] And help us not to equate justice with kind of cheap fairness, but to realize that we've received something that we did not deserve.

And we are eternally grateful for that. Now please help us image you well, help us glorify you, shine out the beauty of your holiness in this broken world by giving voice to the voiceless, defending the poor and needy, loving mercy, walking humbly with you.

We thank you for this challenging word. Amen.