

Christ Community Covenant Church
Healthy Things Grow: Ministries of Justice, Compassion and Mercy
Pastor Dave Scherrer - June 8, 2014

Let's be clear on the idea of speaking up for God in the idea of justice, mercy and compassion. These concepts have been hotly politicized. In fact several years ago I spoke of God's desire for 'social justice' and I was angrily confronted by one of our congregants as if I were promoting what he thought was a left wing political agenda that he did not like. Let me be clear this morning. When I speak about justice, compassion and mercy I am not speaking about socialism or republicanism or democratism – I am referring to the act of responding to the needs of humanity with the character of God. It is God who is just. It is God who is merciful. It is God who is compassionate. No political system or political ideology can offer justice and mercy the way God does. Politics advances political agenda. God advances His agenda according to character for His purposes.

God has a long habit of caring for those who are discarded and lost

There are hundreds of verses that speak of God's heart for justice, and of course there are over 2000 verses on God's concerns over poverty alone.

The Hebrew word for "justice," *mishpat*, occurs in its various forms more than 200 times in the Hebrew Old Testament. Its most basic meaning is to treat people equitably. It means acquitting or punishing every person on the merits of the case, regardless of race or social status. Anyone who does the same wrong should be given the same penalty. *Mishpat*, then, is giving people what they are due, whether punishment or protection or care.

Mishpat: giving people what they are due

But *mishpat* means more than just the punishment of wrongdoing. It also means giving people their rights. Deuteronomy 18 directs that the priests of the tabernacle should be supported by a certain percentage of the people's income. This support is described as "the priests' *mishpat*," which means their due or their right. *Mishpat*, then, is giving people what they are due, whether punishment or protection or care.

This is why, if you look at every place the word is used in the Old Testament, several classes of persons continually come up. Over and over again, *mishpat* describes taking up the care and cause of widows, orphans, immigrants and the poor—those who have been called "the quartet of the vulnerable."

In premodern, agrarian societies, these four groups had no social power. They lived at subsistence level and were only days from starvation if there was any famine, invasion or even minor social unrest. Today, this quartet would be expanded to include the refugee, the migrant worker, the homeless and many single parents and elderly people.

The *mishpat*, or justness, of a society, according to the Bible, is evaluated by how it treats these groups. Any neglect shown to the needs of the members of this quartet is not called merely a lack of mercy or charity but a violation of justice, of *mishpat*. God loves and defends those with the least economic and social power, and so should we. That is what it means to "do justice, compassion and mercy."

Why should we be concerned about the vulnerable ones? It is because God is concerned about them. It is striking to see how often God is introduced as the defender of these vulnerable groups. Don't miss the significance of this. When I am speaking somewhere people may ask me, "How do you want to be introduced?" I usually propose they say, "This is Dave Scherrer, minister at Christ Community Covenant Church in Arvada Colorado." Of course, I am many other things, but that is the main thing I spend my time doing in public life.

Realize, then, how significant it is that the biblical writers introduce God as “a father to the fatherless, a defender of widows” (Psalm 68:4-5). This is one of the main things He does in the world. He identifies with the powerless. He takes up their cause.

Again in Psalm 89 we read;

Psalm 89:14

Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; love and faithfulness go before you.

I am increasingly convinced that mercy, justice and compassion are expressions of righteousness. There is no righteousness without them. We tend to think of righteousness and holiness as simply the absence of sin. Then when we seek to be holy as God is holy we try to ‘sin less’ or be sinless. When we approach our journey this way, a loser’s game by the way, we miss the point. When we practice purposeful compassion and have an eye for injustice and invest in acts of mercy, we participate in the character of God. We participate in righteousness.

Proverbs 29:7

The righteous care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern.

God grows weary of religious people and practices that have no meaning but for show. The prophets often declare the frustration and anger God feels when people who otherwise confess their faith in God Almighty but then act indifferently to the needs of the marginalized.

Micah 6:8

⁶ “With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high?

Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?

⁷ Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil?

Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”

⁸ He has told you, O 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?

Isaiah 1:11, 17

“What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the LORD;

I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts;

I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. Learn to do good;

Seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause.

There are no paper plates in God's Kingdom

There are no use once throw away people in the Kingdom of God. Everyone matters. The mentally retarded matter, the stranger matters. The imprisoned matter and the not yet born matter. The elderly matter and the sexual offender matter. The drug addicted matter and the stranger matter. Orphans matter and so do the sexually abused, the mentally ill and the bereaved matter too.

But let me take it a bit further. Those who struggle to tell the truth matter. Those who gossip matter. Those who cheat and steal matter. Those who struggle with sexual identity matter. Those who abuse matter. Paul reminds us that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. Remember that as I said last week, Jesus was called the friend of sinners and it is an honor to be called His disciple and to stand accused of the same charge.

“We instinctively tend to limit for whom we exert ourselves. We do it for people like us, and for people whom we like. Jesus will have none of that. By depicting a Samaritan helping a Jew, Jesus could not have found a more forceful way to say that anyone at all in need - regardless of race, politics, class, and religion - is your neighbor. Not everyone is your brother or sister in faith, but everyone is your neighbor, and you must love your neighbor.”

Do you remember one of the last teachings of Christ when he spoke of the judgment and using the metaphor of God as the Great Shepherd, he separates the sheep from the goats and calls the sheep righteous noting their righteous behavior of ministering to the poor and the stranger and the needy.

Matthew 25:37-40

Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'

Relationships matter. In Matthew 23:23 (Cross reference to Isaiah 1:11 and 17) we read; "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices – mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law: justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former."

Here we see Christ's admonishment identical to Isaiah's: of which we just read a moment ago - how holy you become (while so very important and just as central as what we are talking about here) is irrelevant without justice, mercy and faithfulness. Of course, the reverse is every bit as true.

This passage reminds us that we must have a strong concern for the poor, but there is more to the biblical idea of justice than that. We get more insight when we consider a second Hebrew word that can be translated as "being just," though it is usually translated as "being righteous." The word is *tzadeqah*, and it refers to a life of right relationships.

Tzadeqah: a life of right relationships

When most modern people see the word "righteousness" in the Bible, they tend to think of it in terms of private morality, such as sexual chastity or diligence in prayer and Bible study. But in the Bible, *tzadeqah* refers to day-to-day living in which a person conducts all relationships in family and society with fairness, generosity and equity. It is not surprising, then, to discover that *tzadeqah* and *mishpat* are brought together scores of times in the Bible.

These two words roughly correspond to what some have called "primary" and "rectifying justice." Rectifying justice is *mishpat*. It means punishing wrongdoers and caring for the victims of unjust treatment. Primary justice, or *tzadeqah*, is behavior that, if it was prevalent in the world, would render rectifying justice unnecessary, because everyone would be living in right relationship to everyone else. Therefore, though *tzadeqah* is primarily about being in a right relationship with God, the righteous life that results is profoundly social.

Rectifying justice, or *mishpat*, in our world could mean prosecuting the men who batter, exploit and rob poor women. It could also mean respectfully putting pressure on a local police department until they respond to calls and crimes as quickly in the poor part of town as in the prosperous part. Another example would be to form an organization that both prosecutes and seeks justice against loan companies that prey on the poor and the elderly with dishonest and exploitive practices.

Primary justice, or *tzadeqah*, may mean taking the time personally to meet the needs of the handicapped, the elderly or the hungry in our neighborhoods. Or it could mean the establishment of new nonprofits to serve the interests of these classes of persons. It could also mean a group of families from the more prosperous side of town adopting the public school in a poor community and making generous donations of money and pro bono work in order to improve the quality of education there.

When these two words, *tzadeqah* and *mishpat*, are tied together, as they are over three dozen times, the English expression that best conveys the meaning is "social justice." I am so sad that politics has stolen

this phrase so that I cannot say something that is at the core of God's heart and character without raising political alarm.

Let me say it again - To know God is to know that His concerns are for the needy of every expression and then to act in His name to remedy the circumstance.

Jeremiah 22:16

He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well.
Is not this to know me? declares the LORD.

You see to know God is to know His righteousness and to know His righteousness is to participate in the priorities of Christ. Jesus' brother, the writer of James wrote

James 1:27

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

Generosity and kindness are their own purpose

Interviews:

"The church exists to dance and advance not reside in a manse"



What will be our hallmark?