

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
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## **The Pursuit of Justice**

Deuteronomy 16:18-17:13

On January 10, the film *Just Mercy* was released. It recounts the story of Walter McMillian, an African American who owned a lumber company in a small town in Alabama, and was framed for the murder of Ronda Morrison, an 18-year-old white girl. McMillian's attorney, Bryan Stevenson, had opened a law firm that provided legal defense for those awaiting execution on death row, and took on McMillian's case. *Just Mercy* takes viewers deeper into Stevenson's relentless, faith-rooted pursuit of truth and justice, as he works to exonerate McMillian, and right a terrible wrong.

In a recent interview with *Christianity Today*, Bryan Stevenson talked about the timing of the film's release. He said: "This is a critical time in our nation's history. We've been so divided by the politics of fear and anger that it's easy to stop caring about things we should care about. It's easy to tolerate things we shouldn't tolerate. And the way you combat that is to get people closer to inequality, to injustice, to things that are unfair."<sup>1</sup>

If you don't want to get closer to issues of inequality, injustice, and unfairness, then don't open the Bible. Its pages are filled with stories, commands, songs, prayers, and proclamations about righteousness, especially God's righteousness. From the story of creation in Genesis to the consummation of the new creation in Revelation, the Scriptures narrate God's faithful and loving determination to take what's wrong and set it right. To redeem his people. To heal his wounded world. To reconcile us to himself. To establish his everlasting reign of justice and peace.

Today's Scripture passage from Deuteronomy is a glimpse into the importance of justice in the life of God's people. In order to help the people live righteously, God provides them with an order of judicial officials to oversee the administration of law. These legal officials were responsible for being familiar with rulings and principles of legislation. They had to control the conduct of cases and keep careful records. Above all, they had to ensure the fairness of the proceedings. They were responsible for applying the law impartially and evenhandedly. In short, justice mattered, and those entrusted with administering it were accountable for implementing the will of God and guarding the worship of God.

That's because injustice and idolatry were intertwined. It's not as if injustice was just a political matter and idolatry a religious matter. Right living and right worship went hand in hand. If you're weren't pursuing justice and righteousness together with others in the community of God's people, you weren't faithfully honoring God and worshiping God. God's own righteousness was evident in his acts of love and faithfulness. So practicing justice was itself an expression of love for God and love for others.

The God of Israel, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, is a just God. That doesn't mean God isn't loving. Sometimes people wrongly conclude that God's love and God's justice are in opposition to each other. But in reality, God is both loving and judging. God's wrath, another concept that troubles lots of folks, is actually part of God's merciful determination

to set things right in our relationship with him and with one another. I like the way that author Becky Pippert puts it when she says:

Think how we feel when we see someone we love ravaged by unwise actions or relationships. Do we respond with benign tolerance as we might toward strangers? Far from it. . . . Anger isn't the opposite of love. Hate is, and the final form of hate is indifference. . . . God's wrath is not a cranky explosion, but his settled opposition to the cancer . . . which is eating out the insides of the human race he loves with his whole being.<sup>2</sup>

God's love for humankind, for each of us, is embodied in his love of justice. In the book of Jeremiah, the Lord says: "Let not the wise boast of their wisdom or the strong boast of their strength or the rich boast of their riches, but let the one who boasts boast about this: that they have the understanding to know me, that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight" (9:23-24).

Bible scholar Christopher Wright tells about a friend in India who had grown up among a despised outcast community. He and his family had suffered harassment, violence, and injustice at the hands of high-caste people in the village. As a result, he decided that he would pursue his education, get a job with influence and power, and turn the tables on his enemies.

When he arrived at the university and found a Bible in his room, translated into his own language, he opened it at random and read the story of Naboth and King Ahab in 1 Kings 21. In the story, King Ahab uses his power to steal land from Naboth, an ordinary farmer. "This was my story," said Wright's friend, recognizing in the text his own family's experience of brutality at the hands of the powerful. But then he read further and discovered a man called Elijah, who denounced Ahab and promised that he would be judged by God. To Wright's friend, this was astounding. In Hinduism, he had many gods to choose from, but he had never heard of a god like this one in the Bible. This god took the side of the suffering ones and condemned the wicked deeds of the powerful. His exact words were, "I never knew such a god existed."

As this man continued to read, he learned about Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, and the biblical call to forgive. But his path to conversion began by meeting the God who is just, who loves righteousness, and who takes up the cause of the oppressed.<sup>3</sup>

"Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue," is the demand in today's text (16:20). In one respect, this is the ideal. This is what it would be like if the people were faithfully and fully living out God's righteous will. But the fact that our text goes into such detail about the law code and how to administer it is itself a sign that God's people had fallen far short of what God intended. Notice especially the stress on judges being impartial and evenhanded, which indicates that justice was always susceptible to being corrupted or subverted, and power could easily be abused. Possessing God's divine commands as a holy gift was one thing. Having human legal officials actually applying the divine will in specific cases was another. No matter how lofty and noble a judicial system may be, it's always subject to the limitations, weakness, and sinfulness of the people who are charged with implementing it.

If you're familiar with the original television series, *Law & Order*, you may remember the opening narration: "In the criminal justice system, the people are represented by two separate yet equally important groups: the police who investigate crime, and the district attorneys who prosecute the offenders. These are their stories." Then the familiar sound effect that helps move you, scene by scene, through each episode. The process seems pretty straightforward. A crime scene, followed by police and detective work, followed by

legal and courtroom proceedings. But within the show's basic pattern, there's all sorts of character complexity, legal maneuvering, and courtroom drama. You see the brokenness, limitations, and fallibility of the people involved in the justice system, and even when the verdict is announced, you may still feel ambivalent about the outcome, with no real sense of complete resolution. The show reminds us that the criminal justice system is messy, to put it mildly.

Each day, my drive between home and church takes me by the Charles County Courthouse. People from all walks of life are going in and out of its doors. Some are there to pay a traffic ticket. Some are there to get married. Some are there because they've been summoned to jury duty. Some are there as law enforcement officers. Some are there to represent their clients. Some are there as plaintiffs. Some are there as defendants. Yet all have come to that place to participate, in some form or another, in meeting the demands of the law and fulfilling the ideals of justice.

In his book, *Simply Christian*, N. T. Wright reflects on our longing for justice. He has a chapter titled, "Putting the World to Rights." He begins the chapter with this story:

I had a dream the other night, a powerful and interesting dream. And the really frustrating thing is that I can't remember what it was about. I had a flash of it as I woke up, enough to make me think how extraordinary and meaningful it was; and then it was gone . . . . Our passion for justice often seems like that. We dream the dream of justice. We glimpse, for a moment, a world at one, a world put to rights, a world where things work out, where societies function fairly and efficiently . . . and then we wake up and come back to reality.<sup>4</sup>

Justice isn't just a lofty, noble ideal. It's a down-to-earth, difficult, and demanding project that sometimes measures up to expectations, but many times leaves us disappointed and disillusioned. The fact is, we all engage with the realities of law, and the administration of justice, on a regular basis, even if it's something as basic as voting for the clerk of the court or slowing down for the speed camera positioned near a local school. But for many folks, entering the justice system gets much deeper and significantly more difficult. Our church, like every congregation, includes people who have experienced firsthand the highs and the lows, the satisfactions and the frustrations, of the judicial system. Some of you have sat there waiting for the judge's decision. Some of you have served in law enforcement. Some of you have had a family member, or friend, or coworker, who was incarcerated. Some of you have navigated the complexities of the attorney-client relationship. To you, the legal system isn't some abstract conception. It's a lived reality. You've been in it. In some cases, you feel like justice was served. In other cases, you feel like justice was subverted.

Whether you feel like justice was done or justice was denied, you continue to gather with this community of believers who worship and serve a God who loves righteousness and justice, and whose goal for us is righteous, just living. Rather than give up on God's will and purpose for the world and for our lives, you join together with others whose desire for righteousness is driven and shaped by faith in the Lord. We come together, we open up the Scriptures, and we hear again about the Lord's determination to take what's wrong and make it right. That's why Bishop Desmond Tutu once said, "There's nothing more radical, nothing more revolutionary, nothing more subversive against injustice and oppression than the Bible. If you want to keep people subjugated, the last thing you place in their hands is a Bible."<sup>5</sup>

Martin Luther King, Jr., whose life and legacy we remember this weekend, knew this as well. He spent his life fighting against injustice because he knew that however limited and unsatisfactory our legal systems may be, there's always a higher divine law that motivates

us and holds us accountable for how we give our lives to the cause of justice and peace. In our time, as in King's time, there are many ways to do that. We can continue to put time, energy, and resources into prison ministries, where the focus is on bringing individuals to faith in Christ and into transformed living. We can cultivate ministries that serve those who've been released from jail as they try to make the transition back into local communities. We can join with other followers of Jesus to take on the task of justice reform, especially the issue of mass incarceration. That doesn't mean that individuals shouldn't be held accountable for, and punished for, their crimes. But it does mean that from a Christian perspective, our approach to crime has to go beyond just punishment and into redemption and restoration.

What's more, we can also seek justice, and love God and neighbor, not only by offering hope to the perpetrators, but also healing to the victims. We can support agencies that provide legal assistance. We can provide emotional, material, and spiritual support to those who suffer from other's crimes. We can offer counseling that helps them patiently process their pain, their sadness, their anger, and their loss. We can even point them in the direction of forgiveness and reconciliation. This isn't just a matter of saying, "Oh well, forgive and forget." It's not that simple. It takes time, in an often gradual process of coming to grips with the harm the person has experienced, in order to reach a point where the hope of a different future, a future marked by peace, starts to open up.

Why do these kinds of things? Not primarily because of our determination to pursue justice, though that's significant. But most of all because justice and righteousness are God's passionate pursuit. And if we want to see God's vision of peace and wholeness, we simply have to look to what he has done through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ to reach out to all of us, both perpetrators and victims, with mercy and love.

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<sup>1</sup> Dominique Dubois Gilliard, "Bryan Stevenson Wants to Liberate People from the Lie That Their Life Doesn't Matter." Christianity Today website. January 10, 2020. Accessed January 15, 2020 <[https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/january-web-only/just-mercy-film-bryan-stevenson.html?utm\\_source=connection-html&utm\\_medium=Newsletter&utm\\_term=18506759&utm\\_content=692193730&utm\\_campaign=email](https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/january-web-only/just-mercy-film-bryan-stevenson.html?utm_source=connection-html&utm_medium=Newsletter&utm_term=18506759&utm_content=692193730&utm_campaign=email)>.

<sup>2</sup> Pippert is quoted in Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God* (New York: Viking, 2008) 73.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, *Salvation Belongs to Our God* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008) 48-49.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted at Preaching Today website. Accessed January 16, 2020 <<https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2010/december/4120610.html>>.

<sup>5</sup> Desmond Tutu, speaking at London's Jesus House for All Nations Church, in the "Who Is My Neighbor" conference (September 6, 2008).