

2018 Spring Bible Study – Act Justly **Week 2: Justice and Shalom**

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Introduction

According to a long philosophical and theological tradition in Western thought, justice is about “giving to another what’s right or due”. Sometimes this is understood as “retribution”—where justice means receiving your due punishment—and other times it means “restitution”—if someone takes something away that is due to you, they have to give it back or somehow make amends. We can think of retribution and restitution in social terms (the government has the authority to punish law-breakers, and is owed income taxes) or in personal terms (if your roommate borrows money from you, she should pay you back). In the Christian tradition, we might ultimately understand justice as “restoration”—God’s final “setting to rights” of the whole creation, including our broken relationships with God and each other.

While we can think cosmically about justice when we consider what Jesus accomplished on the cross, we can also think smaller-scale about how Christlikeness also impacts our daily interactions with others. When you consider the passage below, think about how Jesus models acting justly in a “restorative” sense.

Read Mark 3:1-6 with your group. (Each person can take a verse.)

3 Again Jesus entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. ² They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. ³ And he said to the man who had the withered hand, “Come forward.” ⁴ Then he said to them, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?” But they were silent. ⁵ He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. ⁶ The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

Responding to the Word

1. How do the religious leaders conceive of the requirements to “do what is right” in this story? How is their view of what God is due in the Sabbath command too small?
2. How does Jesus respond to the religious leaders? Why is he angry?
3. How is Jesus’ commitment to what is due to others in this situation different?
4. How does Jesus go about setting things right? Does everything get set right between all the characters in this passage? How will things ultimately be set right?

Reflection

The Pharisees are interested in being righteous and just according to law, law meaning God’s commandments and the community’s religious codes. They also focus on the letter and not the spirit of the law: keeping Sabbath in a way that gives God his due in external actions that conform only to the “rules” laid down for religious performance.

Jesus calls them out on this game. He insists that they see beyond the ‘righteousness of commandment-following’ to see what the rules are *for*. They are for the sake of truly just, truly whole relationships; they are for shalom. *Just* Sabbath-keeping should reflect that. Does it honor God (give God his due) if you dismissively neglect the suffering ones who stand before your very eyes in God’s house, or if you harden your hearts to the needs of the neighbor beside you as you say your prayers?

Jesus is trying to reconnect the internal matter of righteousness (the spirit of the law) with external behavior (the letter of the law). Real justice will have to take account of both. Jesus honors the Sabbath in a way that shows us that true restoration and shalom are what just action is ultimately for. He is angry at the Pharisees’ hard-heartedness—their stubborn refusal to give the man with the withered hand, and the God who loves him, their due. But what is Jesus’ ultimate response to everything that is not right about this confrontation in the synagogue? *He heals the man.*

The Calvin College mission calls us to be Christ’s ambassadors and agents of renewal. Jesus really wants us to have true justice—justice through and through. He cares about our hearts AND he cares about our behavior. Why is he angry with the Pharisees here? Because they care more about the legal codes that make them look righteous and respectable than having hearts broken by the sin and suffering they see, and hands devoted to putting God’s world to rights again.

Jesus shows us what justice is really all about. When Jesus promises to “make all things new,” he is the ultimate justice-bringer. Fundamentally, this is God’s work—but he asks us to be partners in this mission. When we pledge to “act justly” what we are really committing to is seeing the world through God’s eyes, having our hearts broken by what is not right, and in the name of Christ doing all we can to rebuild, heal, and restore.

Practical Suggestions:

1. Where are you substituting the letter of the law for a heart devoted to giving others what they are due? Think of at least one place you tend to do this. How would your actions change if you committed to wholehearted justice instead?
2. Find one “neighbor” you come face to face with each week who is not receiving due respect, attention, or compassion. Make a commitment to give that person their due in at least one way per day this week.
3. The next time you get angry, step back and brainstorm or journal about how you can act to restore or heal the situation. Then put your reflections into practice.

Prayer:

“My heart shall sing of the day you bring,
Let the fires of your justice burn.
Wipe away all tears, for the dawn draws near,
And the world is about to turn.” (*Lift Up Your Hearts*, #69)

Oh Lord, may we as your people be lovers of justice. May we push back against the darkness and wipe away the tears of the world. May we seek your kingdom and your righteousness with our whole hearts. AMEN.