

# COMPASSIONATE JUSTICE

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*Presented at Trinity Community Church, San Rafael, California, on Sunday, January 4, 2009*

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Before you read this sermon, I urge you to read Isaiah 42 (the entire chapter).

## **What is “Justice”?**

(I am indebted to the Third Edition of The New Bible Dictionary for this summary of the Biblical development of the use and application of the word “justice.”)

Justice is the same word as “righteousness,” but not in the sense of “fair play” or “legal equity,” as it is commonly used today.

“To do (someone) justice” (occurring twice in the Old Testament) meant to declare someone right.

Etymologically (originally), the root word refers to “straightness,” in a physical sense. But its application morphed over time (as many significant words have).

In the time of the patriarchs (Abraham and Noah), it came to mean conformity to an accepted standard of values.

From the time of Moses onward, it refers to God’s will and the actions which reliably result from it.

It then came to mean the moral standard by which God measures human conduct.

With reference to government (especially, divine), justice describes the appropriate punishment for moral infractions, and also the deeds of vindication for those who have behaved well.

Then, through David’s writing and worship, the word expands to include divine mercy, love and grace — righteousness became redemptive, regardless of men’s merits (as in 1 John 1, “faithful and just to forgive... and to cleanse from all unrighteousness”).

Now, through Christ, righteousness, which in itself is an attribute of God, by His grace, becomes the possession of each believer, who in turn is to seek “justice” or lovingkindness for the helpless and needy.

There is a certain, and necessary, tension here: justice seems to forgive the very crimes that it once condemned and punished. The solution to this apparent contradiction is found in the person and work of Jesus Christ the Lord.

The ethical example of His life constitutes the climactic expression of the moral will of God. Yet, He who commanded all men to “be perfect,” as our Heavenly Father is perfect, exhibited an unparalleled love, as He willingly sacrificed His own life for His undeserving friends. He was “just and the justifier” of those who trust in Him.

Jesus Christ, who personally knew no sin, became sin for us, so that we could become the righteousness of God through Him.

Christ’s justice became our justification!

NOW, in the light of this understanding, let's review the passage of Isaiah's prophecy that is before us.

## His Objective

*1 He will bring justice to the nations.*

Now, we understand that this justice is not the mere temporal, human variety of "fair play" or vengeance, but the eternal, divine variety that declares undeserving humans right in the sight of God based on the righteousness of Jesus in whom we trust.

God is bringing *HIS* brand of justice to the peoples of the world — redemption through faith in Jesus. God is seeking to save those who are (otherwise) lost.

As Jesus also said, *"This gospel of the Kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations (peoples), and then the end will come."* (Matthew 24:14)

## His Manner

This one chapter presents two apparently contradictory descriptions of Messiah, or descriptions of two messiahs. It has been a point of controversy for millennia. The beginning of the chapter describes Him as gentle, while the end of the chapter describes Him as ferocious. Christians recognize that Messiah Jesus appears twice — first, as the gentle Savior; later, as the conquering Warrior — which settles the dispute. Yet, there is something of both characteristics all the time, as it was said of C.S. Lewis' Aslan (the Lion-King of Narnia): "Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you." Not safe, in the sense of predictable, but always good, all the time.

*2 He will not shout or raise his voice in public.*

*3 He will not crush the weakest reed or put out a flickering candle. He will bring justice to all who have been wronged.*

*4 He will not falter or lose heart until justice prevails throughout the earth. Even distant lands beyond the sea will wait for his instruction."*

Jesus, the Messenger, arrives compassionately. He is comforting and tenderhearted, empathetic and encouraging, and also persistent. His unrelenting mercy finds ample opportunity in the face of the legalistic, judgmental, and arrogant religious leaders of his day.

## His Calling

*6 "I, the Lord, have called you to demonstrate my righteousness. I will take you by the hand and guard you, and I will give you to my people, Israel, as a symbol of my covenant with them. And you will be a light to guide the nations.*

*7 You will open the eyes of the blind. You will free the captives from prison, releasing those who sit in dark dungeons.*

God has called *us* to display His righteousness. We are His witnesses, re-presenting Jesus Christ to the world. You may be the only "Bible" another person ever reads.

We are the sign of His covenant of grace. *"This is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples—when they see the love you have for each other."* (John 13:35, The Message)

Jesus said we are now the Light of the world, bringing light to those who sit in darkness, recovery of sight to the blind, healing to the brokenhearted, and liberty to the captives. His Spirit is upon us to that end!

## **Sing His Praise**

Almost like an interlude, Isaiah drifts into praise for what he has just heard, and invites his readers to join him!

*10 Sing a new song to the Lord!  
12 Let the whole world glorify the Lord;  
let it sing his praise.*

Let the story of Christ's worthiness become the song of our hearts. Let it be continually on our lips to glorify His name. *"This people I have formed for Myself; they shall declare My praise."* (Isaiah 43:21)

## **A New Day**

Ultimately, the song of worship — as it spreads across the "whole world" — brings in a new day, the Day of the Lord.

Yet, in every generation, as worship arises in the hearts of God's people, something new blossoms, a victory is birthed.

*13 The Lord will march forth like a mighty hero; he will come out like a warrior, full of fury. He will shout his battle cry and crush all his enemies. 14 He will say, "I have long been silent; yes, I have restrained myself. But now, like a woman in labor, I will cry and groan and pant.*

It is a day of new birth! That is our battle cry! Not "Judgment to all sinners," but "Grace to all who have sinned!"

God's mercy has been pent up, like some great waters, and is now ready to explode upon the earth in gracious deliverance... *when* the people of God cry out for it!

*15 I will level the mountains and hills and blight all their greenery. I will turn the rivers into dry land and will dry up all the pools.*

God will level the religious terrain, and it will seem like a blight, an emptiness. But this is simply to reveal the hollowness of man-made spirituality, which cannot bring true righteousness. The priests and pastors and professors will seem blind, until God takes them by the hand...

*16 I will lead blind Israel down a new path, guiding them along an unfamiliar way. I will brighten the darkness before them and smooth out the road ahead of them. Yes, I will indeed do these things; I will not forsake them.*

I believe we are living in such a day as he described. And there is a natural — very natural — reluctance. A spiritual inertia that must first be overcome.

## Weakened By Inaction

*20 You see and recognize what is right but refuse to act on it. You hear with your ears, but you don't really listen." 21 Because he is righteous, the Lord has exalted his glorious law.*

Inaction is the curse of the contemporary church. We learn and learn, but never come to the knowledge of the truth — which is not a concept, but always *deeds of love*. Hear again the lament of the author of the Book of Hebrews:

*Hebrews 5:12 You have been believers so long now that you ought to be teaching others. Instead, you need someone to teach you again the basic things about God's word. You are like babies who need milk and cannot eat solid food. <sup>13</sup> For someone who lives on milk is still an infant and doesn't know how to do what is right. <sup>14</sup> Solid food is for those who are mature, who through training have the skill to recognize the difference between right and wrong.*

I am not pointing unstained fingers at you, but I am begging you to hear the truth of our condition, and to join me in pursuing God's redemptive plan.

The Lord's "glorious law" is not the code of Moses, but what the New Testament calls the "perfect law of liberty" — the law of Christ's love that liberates the undeserving who trust in Him and receive His grace.

*22 But his own people have been robbed and plundered, enslaved, imprisoned, and trapped. They are fair game for anyone and have no one to protect them, no one to take them back home.*

*23 Who will hear these lessons from the past and see the ruin that awaits you in the future?*

Inaction is an unprotected condition, which puts you and I in danger of spiritual deception, slavery, and loss. James put it this way:

*James 1: 22 But don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves. <sup>23</sup> For if you listen to the word and don't obey, it is like glancing at your face in a mirror. <sup>24</sup> You see yourself, walk away, and forget what you look like. <sup>25</sup> But if you look carefully into the perfect law that sets you free, and if you do what it says and don't forget what you heard, then God will bless you for doing it.*

We are blessed when we do it...  
...and cursed when we don't.

*24 Who allowed Israel to be robbed and hurt? It was the Lord, against whom we sinned, for the people would not walk in his path, nor would they obey his law.*

*25 Therefore, he poured out his fury on them and destroyed them in battle. They were enveloped in flames, but they still refused to understand. They were consumed by fire, but they did not learn their lesson.*

God is not a bully who likes to beat us up. God's punishment is intended to awaken us and teach us to change our ways.

The judgments leveled on Israel for their disobedience in the past have been recorded for our instruction, so we won't repeat their ways of resistant unbelief and inaction.

They refused to carry the message to the nations around them. They preferred to hoard and “pre-serve” the blessings for themselves, imagining that they who received them were somehow special... deserving... better. Has such a thought ever crept into your mind?

## Who Will Hear?

*23 Who will hear these lessons from the past?*

Apostle Paul echoed a similar concern:

*Romans 10:9 If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. <sup>10</sup> For it is by believing in your heart that you are made right with God, and it is by confessing with your mouth that you are saved. <sup>13</sup> For “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”*

*<sup>14</sup> But how can they call on him to save them unless they believe in him? And how can they believe in him if they have never heard about him? And how can they hear about him unless someone tells them? <sup>15</sup> And how will anyone go and tell them without being sent? That is why the Scriptures say, “How beautiful are the feet of messengers who bring good news!”*

“Feet” implies movement — *bringing* the Good News to those who need to hear it, not waiting for them to come knocking.

That’s why the Whole Armor of God includes special shoes for your feet.

*Ephesians 6:15 For shoes, put on the peace that comes from the Good News so that you will be fully prepared.*

2009 must be our year to get busy with God’s enduring plan to bring Good News to the people of Marin. Not just on Sunday mornings, through preaching and classes (and not just through preachers and teachers), but also Monday through Saturday by each and everyone of us — in homes, schools, workplaces, golf courses, gyms, restaurants, parks, and playgrounds.

Will you dedicate yourself to hear and respond? To act on God’s word of promise? To become a “light-bearer” to those in your circle of influence? Will you commit to bringing God’s justice through compassion?

*Matthew 5:16 Let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father.*