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Hindsight’s 2020 December 13, 2020

On Monday of this week, I got online to book some flights for my family for a trip next year. Round trip cost for my airfare? $75 a person. I’ve never seen prices like this before in my life! I chose the dates and times, put in our names and birthdays, put in our credit card information, and paid. I then got a confirmation email, and as I read over it, I realized I misspelled my son’s name. I know they can be kind of particular about that at the airport, so I found the customer service number and called them. After I selected what I pressed a few buttons to tell them what I was calling about, they told me how long my expected wait was. Any guesses? 16 hours and 48 minutes!

My first thought was: “Well, it’s too bad Hudson won’t be able to join us on our trip.” My second thought was: “This is so unfair. You can’t make me wait that long. That’s not just.” Now obviously that is small potatoes in the grand scheme of things, but as we go through life, every one of us has things that happen to us that are unjust, that aren’t fair. Bullied as a kid. Singled out as an example by a teacher. Not chosen for a job you were the most qualified for. Not compensated fairly because you were too young, or too old, or too dark, or too overweight. Things in life that make you say, “That’s not fair. That’s unjust.”

It’s interesting that when we talk about things being right and fair we appeal to a concept about justice. It’s not just that we think this was wrong according to our perspective, we say that it is wrong, period. Not just wrong based upon the way our culture understands things in this unique window of time, but wrong for *all* people at *all* times. We appeal to a universal sense of justice, that things that happen in our world are right or wrong not based on how I subjectively interpret them, but based upon how they align with an objective sense with what we know to be true about justice.

Whether we realize it or not, we have had conversations about what is just, what is fair, what is right, all year long. And as we look back on this calendar year in this series called Hindsight’s 2020, think about all the different conversations we have had where people on both sides have appealed to a sense of justice and fairness. From mask mandates, to the black lives matters movement, to the confirmation of a new supreme court justice weeks before an election, to ongoing discussions about immigration, social media censorship, whether the vote counting was fair, student loan forgiveness...all throughout the year we have had constant discussions where people on every side of the issue were appealing to a sense of what is right, fair, equitable, and just.

God’s word has so much to say about justice, and we see the message about justice again and again in the book of Isaiah. If you have your Bibles, turn with me to Isaiah 1. As this book is just beginning, God levies critique after critique against his people for their sins. And it wasn’t that they were drinking too much, or smoking too much, or accidently using too many curse words, or watching too many R rated movies. He confronts them for their lack of justice. Listen to what he says in Isaiah 1:16-17: “Wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight; stop doing wrong. Learn to do right; seek justice.” God says that if people want to honor him, they have to stop doing things that are wrong, begin to do right...and seek justice. We see the call for justice nowhere more clear than in Isaiah 58. Flip there with me and let’s see what else we are told:

“Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet. Declare to my people their rebellion and to the descendants of Jacob their sins. For day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God. They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them. ‘Why have we fasted,’ they say, ‘and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?’ Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high.” (Isaiah 58:1-4)

What is God saying here? His people were expecting God to honor them because they were praying and fasting, because they were reading their bible and going to church and saying that they wanted to know the will of God for their lives. And God says, “You’ve got to be kidding me! You begin your day in prayer, but then you oppress your employees and refuse to give them a living wage. What are your prayers producing?! You read your bible every morning, but then you close your bible, walk outside, and end up in a fight with your neighbor...who the bible tells you to love as you love yourself! Are you even paying attention?!”

And then God tells them, let me tell you the kind of religious devotion I want. Not external piety, not going through the motions, but a commitment to bring about justice for those in need:

“Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for people to humble themselves? Is it only for bowing one’s head like a reed and for lying in sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter – when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: ‘Here am I.’” (Isaiah 58:5-9)

The Bible not only tells us that justice exists, the Bible tells us that God wants his people to *seek* justice, to *do* justice. In fact, justice is so important to God that justice is the expression he wants our religious devotion to take. What kind of fasting does God ask for in Isaiah? Not cutting out food for 3 days or 7 days or 40 days, no, that’s not how to show me how much you love me, I don’t care about what you eat, I care about how you treat people! That’s how you show me you love me! God is saying: you want to show how devoted you are? Go find someone who doesn’t have a dad, and you be present and consistent in their life. Go find someone who doesn’t have food, and you invite them to your dinner table. Go find someone who is a refugee, who is in a country that is not their own, someone who is seeking safety or food or shelter...and you remember what it was like for your ancestors who spent 400 years in Egypt, a land not their own, they were not there as citizens, they went there as refugees seeking food and shelter, but then they were turned into slaves. You remember your own flesh and blood, and you never let that happen to anyone again. You fight for people in need. You defend people in need. You leverage your personal resources and influence to advocate for people in need. God makes it unmistakably clear: you cannot consider yourself a godly person, you cannot say that God is on your side, unless you are on the side of the poor, the needy, the oppressed, unless you are on the side of bringing about justice to those in need, because all throughout Scripture, *that* is who God identifies with.

The early church understood that! Their commitment to justice was one of the definite qualities and characteristics of the first few centuries of the church. Followers of Jesus had a vision for justice unlike any the world had ever seen. Following the example and teaching of Jesus, the church became a category defying community of justice. They worked for justice in such a complete and holistic way that there was no precedent for it. Historians, Christian and non-Christian alike, have observed the early church’s work for justice in five different ways. I want to talk about those five ways, and as we do, I want to use them as a grid, as a framework for how God might be calling us to be committed to justice in our day.

(1) *Equality for all people.* The Bible teaches that all men and all women are created in God’s image. Every person has inherent dignity, value, and worth. Christians were literally the very first people in the world to teach that idea. In fact, the convictions we have about equality today as a society come not from secular philosophy, not from evolutionary biology, but from the Bible. For centuries, Christians were the leading advocates for civil rights in the world. And I think Christians today should still be at the forefront of the discussion. I was talking to a world-class scholar a few weeks ago, a Harvard Law graduate, a lawyer who has argued several cases before the supreme court. And he made an interesting observation. He said that in the civil war, the north won the battle and brought an end to slavery. But the South won the narrative about black people, that allowed them to continue to be treated as less than fully human for almost another century. That is injustice at its height. And when the church is grounded in Scripture, we will always be leveraging our resources to bring about equality for all. We look to Galatians 3:28 that says, “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” And we realized that if God treats us all equally, we have to do the same for one another.

(2) *Commitment to the poor.* If you were to read through the entire Bible from cover to cover, do you know how many verses you would find about caring for the poor? More than 2000! God identifies with the poor. Proverbs 14:31 says, “Whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God.” And Proverbs 19:17 teaches, “Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will reward them for what they have done.” In the Old Testament, it commands people who have fields, when they harvest them, not to harvest the edges and not to go through them a second time to pick up extra. Other nations required the same thing, but when other nations required it, it was so all of that extra crop could be used as a sacrifice to their gods. In Israel, all of that extra food was used for what? It was given to the poor. And in the early church, Christians took care of their poor, as well as the poor in their cities. Julian, the Roman Emperor in the 4th century AD, wrote to one of his local leaders and told him to build a hotel where people could stay for free, and to start handing out free food to people, and here was his rationale: “For it is disgraceful that there is not a single Jew or Christian who has to beg. They not only take care of their own poor, they take care of ours, as well, while those who belong to us look in vain for the help that we should render them.” In other words, the government had to change their public policy on the poor because the church was gaining too much influence due to their compassionate benevolence. What would it look like today, if the church took such good care of our neighbors that the government changed their public policy because of the example we set? It’s happened before, it could happen again.

(3) *Protection for children.* When a child was born in the ancient world and the family was inconvenienced by the birth, or it was a girl, or had any defect, it was very common practice to take that child to a hill and expose them to the elements, leaving them for dead. Not only did the Christians forbid anyone in the church from ever doing that, instead of allowing the wolves or the slave traders or the cold weather to claim those left children, pastors and church leaders went to get them. Orphanages were started by Christians. And ultimately, infanticide became illegal because Christians continually advocated for the worth and value of newly born children. Christians have always advocated for children, born and unborn, the most vulnerable among us, because every child is made in the image of God. God knits them together in their mother’s womb. Christians have always sought justice for children, and sadly, there has never been a time when children, unborn and newly born, need more advocacy than today. In our country, every day, 2,000 unborn babies are killed. Every day. COVID has been killing roughly 2,000 people a day since the spring. And as a nation we have been doing everything we possibly can to stop it. That many babies have been losing their lives every single day for decades, what are we doing to stop it? People in Jesus’ day looked at children as an annoyance, as an inconvenience. Multiple times in his ministry people tried to keep children from Jesus. When he found out, what did he say? Matthew 19:14 Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” Again, following the teaching of Jesus, the early church transformed the treatment of little children, and we need that to happen again today.

(4) *Conservative sexual ethics.* The ancient pagan world was marked by sexual immorality. Most of the ancient gods were worshipped by engaging in prostitution at the temples. Sex trafficking was normal. Pederasty was celebrated. All men of nobility had mistresses. There was no sacredness to sexuality, until Christians entered into the conversation. Christians looked to the Scriptures where they read Hebrews 13:4, which says, “Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.” And 1 Corinthians 6:18-20, which says, “Flee from sexual immorality...do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies.” Christians were the only people in the ancient world giving this message. One of my favorite pastors to listen to, Tim Keller, has said that the ancient pagan society was stingy with their money and promiscuous with their body. A pagan gave no one their money and everybody their body. Christians turned it upside down. They gave basically everyone their money, and besides their spouse, gave no one their body. Isn’t that incredible? We live in a world with profound confusion about sexuality. And the world doesn’t need to hear more Christians tell them this is what God says you can do and this is what he says you can’t do. They need to see a beautiful, compelling, invitational picture of God’s design of sexuality on display in our lives. The world needs to see a community that doesn’t objectify others through pornography consumption, a community who practices chastity until marriage, and faithfulness within marriage. Christian sexual ethics aren’t just about following an arbitrary list of rules, it’s about aligning our lives with what is just and right and true.

(5) *Love for enemies.* Across the board, the ancient world had a retributive approach to violence. “You hurt me, so I’m going to hurt you.” Which led to basically a non-stop cycle of violence and revenge, where might made right. Then Jesus comes along and teaches in the Sermon on the Mount, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:44-45). The early church tried their best to actually practice this. They forgave their enemies. Like Jesus on the cross, they prayed for people who persecuted them. And they committed themselves to a non-violent way of life. When people became Christians, they withdrew from the army because they felt as followers of Jesus, they couldn't carry a sword and take another person’s life. Before Jesus, everyone always taught, love those who love you, oppose those who wrong you. Jesus dismantled the way of the world and said: Love everyone. Period.

Now I want to pull those five areas of historic Christians commitment to justice up at the same time: (1) Equality for all people. (2) Commitment to the poor. (3) Protection for children. (4) Conservative sexual ethics. (5) Love for enemies. What makes Christianity’s commitment to justice unique, both in the early church, as well as today, is that no one else in the world today is saying all of these things! The left will talk about 1 and 2, while almost always neglecting 3 and 4. The right will talk about 3 and 4, while almost always neglecting 1 and 2. And basically no one is talking about the importance of forgiveness and love. As Christians who base our lives on the example of Jesus and the teachings of the Bible, we have to be committed not just to a few of these that we might find ourselves particularly passionate about, but to *all* of these. That is how we become a category defying, revolutionary community once again.

I hope that as we look back on 2020, we don't just see lots of conversations and debates about justice, but we see the areas where our world and our culture is broken, and we hear God say to us: “Do you know what I really want from you, do you know how you can express your devotion and love for me? Bring justice to a world in need!”

Do you remember what we learned at the end of last week’s message? Toward the end of his life, Jesus told his followers what the end of history will be like. He said all of humanity will stand before him, every person who has ever lived, and then they will be separated into two groups, some on his right, and others on his left. Those on his right he will look to and say, “Come, enter into eternity with me, enjoy the kingdom that has been prepared for you since the creation of the world.” And all of these people, who are given the gift of eternal life say to Jesus, “Why? Why us? What did we do to deserve such a reward?” And Jesus will say to them: “When I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me. 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, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’” What we do for those in need, we do for Christ himself. *This is not just about compassion and kindness, it’s about justice.* Don’t just be kind and polite to people in need, work to establish justice. The world needs it today more than ever.