

Act Justly

Justice, Mercy, Walking Humbly with God: Week 3: Luke 19: Zacchaeus
July 26, 2020

Welcome/intro/vision

Reminder: new here, newcomer's Zoom call RIGHT AFTER the service, link to RSVP in the show more section and in the chat, we'll send you the link to the Zoom call after you RSVP

Week 3 of this series designed to help us to cut through the noise and anxiety

2020 has been one wave after the other of dizzying complicated and stressful situations and experiences

And so there are lots and lots of words coming at us all the time as people try to make sense of it all

And one of the greatest gifts we can get in a season and time when there's so many words is the gift of simple clarity: what really matters? What's really important? Are there some rock-solid anchor points that we can orient ourselves by?

Not simplistic, not ignoring all the complexity

no one should settle for quick and easy answers summer 2020 when so much is at stake and so much is going on that demands thoughtful attention

But what if there are a couple things that are true and strong enough to orient ourselves by SO THAT we're better equipped to wade into all the complexity of summer 2020?

In the Old Testament book of Micah, about 700 years before Christ, we're in a situation that's similar to what we're experiencing today—LOTS and LOTS of noise!

War is all around them, trying to figure out who to trust, the internal life of Israel is in disarray including their religious practices

And Micah has plenty of very, very hard things to say to the people about how things have gone wrong

But at one point as Micah offers one of the most wonderfully simple summations of what it means to be God's people in the whole Bible—read this earlier

He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.

And what does the Lord require of you?

To act justly and to love mercy

and to walk humbly with your God.

Simple. Wonderful. Powerful: act justly, love mercy, walk humbly WITH God

There was just one problem: they didn't do it. In spite of how simple and clear it is

And so God sent someone who could

God sends his Son, the Word puts on flesh, and finally, once and for all, does what the Lord requires of us:

at every turn he acts justly, at every turn he loves mercy, at every single turn he is walking humbly with God

And so over these few weeks, we're looking at the refreshingly simple and clear call from Micah
And we're looking at a different story each week of how Jesus fulfilled this command.

And we've re-arranged the order a bit and today we're getting to the part that Micah opens with: to act justly

A couple months ago I subscribed to a daily email digest called "The Flip Side"

And each weekday they take a major situation or issue in our country or in the world and they give you 3-4 liberal takes on that situation or issue and 3-4 conservative takes on that situation or issue

The idea is to get you out of your own echo chamber and to at least sample what someone on the other side of the political spectrum thinks about that situation

And it's a little crazy-making but very helpful to see how people can see the same event and interpret it in very different ways

But what's been interesting to me is to see that both conservatives and liberals want to claim the word we're talking about today: justice

Liberals talk about injustice in our systems along lines of race and socio-economics that unfairly tips the scales over and against ethnic minorities in our country and the poor

Conservatives wrap justice in slightly different language, typically law and order, but that's essentially their definition of justice

they argue that if we aren't tough on crime, everything devolves into chaos, nobody is safe, and so a just society is one that holds people accountable for their actions

It turns out, we all like justice, we just all want to define it how we want to define it

And so much of the noise here, summer 2020, is people arm wrestling over which definition of justice is most important, whose understanding of justice gets to be enacted

This morning, I think the Scriptures yes and Amen to the desire for justice, but to help us to cut through the gridlock and the noise around who gets to define and enact their understanding of justice

I want to invite us to gather around Jesus, the one who shows us the character of God, to see if we can get some fresh clarity around what real justice looks like

AND how it might interplay with this other core characteristic of God we talked about last wee: mercy

We're going to see how all of that comes together as we look at the story of Zaccheus in Luke 19

If you're new to the Bible, so glad you're joining us—Luke one of 4 biographies of Jesus, we call those the gospels—same life of Jesus, told with some different details and different stories included

And in Luke chapter 19, Jesus is slowly making his way to Jerusalem where he has already told his disciples he is going to be betrayed and executed

But on his way he passes through the city of Jericho, and that's where we pick up the story in Luke 19

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. ² A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. ³ He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. ⁴ So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.

⁵ When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." ⁶ So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. ⁷ All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner."

In the fall of my senior year of high school I had one goal: to get into college at UNC-Chapel Hill

I know for some of you watching today you feel that was probably a misguided aim in life, but chalk it up to be 17-years-old

I hadn't had a particular great high school career, my dad was in the Navy and we had been overseas for 3 years in Spain before moving to the Northern Virginia area summer before sophomore year

and I had some culture shock initially and really struggled to find my niche that first year and a half or so in a school of 5,000 students

But if I could get into UNC, it would redeem all of it. So I applied from my Northern Virginia school and I got accepted with great joy

And eventually this became somewhat public knowledge and for a few folks it was the source of some grumbling—they were ranked higher than me but hadn't gotten in

And what I didn't tell them was this wonderful little secret: when you're a military family and you move every couple of years, you pick a home state and your family pays state taxes there every year--and when you retire, the military pays to move you there

So even though I was applying from Northern Virginia, I was applying as an in-state student, not an out-of-state student

And of course out-of-state requirements were much, much, much more stringent than in-state requirements

And so while my much smarter than me wife got in from Virginia Beach as a legitimate out of state student

I cheated and got in from Northern Virginia as an in-state student

Which I of course did not tell ANYONE because it was one of my few high school victories

But here I am today, coming clean with my full confession!

Getting picked to go to UNC after a hard high school career was a huge win for me after a long couple of years

and going to UNC was one of the best experiences in my life as God met me there in wonderfully transformative ways

When you're not usually the one who gets picked but then you DO get picked, sometimes people grumble

And sometimes when you're used to getting overlooked or grumbled about, sometimes getting picked does something new in you

Zacchaeus was not usually the guy who got picked. And this was largely his own fault

If you're not familiar with life in Jesus's day, the Romans ruled Europe and the Middle East and northern Africa

And they had this brilliant way to tax their conquests: recruit indigenous people to tax their own people

And the way you do that is by telling them the minimum that they had to tax people and then allowing them to charge as much as they wanted on top of that.

Zacchaeus had not only participated in this nasty get-rich scheme, he was **the chief of the nasties! The chief tax collector and so of course he was freakishly wealthy**

And he'd gotten there at the expense of his own people, betraying them by serving the Romans

But then Jesus comes to town. And Jesus had likely passed through Jericho before, maybe several times and perhaps Zacchaeus had even been a part of crowd hearing Jesus teach before

And Zacchaeus wants to see Jesus, but he's a short guy, so he climbs a sycamore tree

The Palestinian government has actually gated off a sycamore tree that's claimed to be the tree itself, there it is, can't verify that myself

But here's a man who has everything and yet knows there's something more. We don't know what compels him to come and see Jesus

It could be anything from a desire to see a local celebrity
to earnestly feeling the emptiness that so many wealthy report throughout the centuries report feeling when money and stuff doesn't fill all the holes in their hearts that they imagined it would

Zacchaeus is a man who has sold out his birthright as a part of the people of Israel for a pot of gold—which is not an unusual story—so many people throughout history have sold themselves out for a pot of gold

And all those who share his birthright hated him for it

And so as Jesus passes through Jericho, there are likely hundreds of people all around him, Zacchaeus is up in this tree

And if this was a high school senior superlatives, Zacchaeus might have been voted by everyone else in the crowd "Least likely for Jesus to bless with his presence"

Because the system has been set-up by the Romans to be tantalizingly unjust

And Zacchaeus has the responsibility for participating and implementing that injustice—a responsibility that he has shrugged off to this point and has gainfully participated in
as he takes money from the children of Abraham in order to give it to machine of Caesar.

I want to propose to you that what Zacchaeus does here is just one specific example of the mistake human beings have made since the beginning of time

In the beginning the Scriptures say that our birthright and our name is "image-bearer"—made in God's image, something of God's character and an eternal soul placed in each one of us

And in the biblical story, Adam and Eve sell out their birthright for a false promise that if they disobeyed God they could be more like God than they already were by participating in a short cut

It was a lie. And it was a disaster. But human beings have fallen for this same lie over and over every since to this very day—that if we do things outside of God's will or God's commands, we'll get what we think we want in that moment

And whenever we do this, it causes breakdown in our own souls and in societies and in relationships

It doesn't always result in injustice, but when it does, injustice is always the wrongful pursuit of chasing after something that requires us to sell out our birthright in order to acquire it.

The vast majority of what the Bible calls sin is what happens when image-bearers forget or ignore the invitation to be image-bearers

and instead choose to fall for pleasing to the eyes lies—lies that appeal to our appetites for sex, money, power, acceptance, popularity, approval, applause, expediency

To believe the lie that in order to get what you think you want right now you have to do something outside the bounds of God's commands and will

An affair, stealing from the company, lying to the people around you, manipulating others around you, gossiping about other people behind their back

There are sins of COMMISSION—stuff we've done

AND there are sins of OMISSION, stuff we leave undone that's actually our responsibility to take on—not every problem in the world is ours to take on, but taking responsibility for what is ours to *take responsibility for is part of how God re-humanizes us after the fall*

Sin always dehumanizes us, pulls us further away from who God intended us to be; taking responsibility for what is ours to take responsibility for is one of the ways God re-humanizes us

When we sin, either through commission or omission, it costs us something—our birthright as image-bearers as we sell out other image-bearers to get what we think that we want

Very often, sometimes unknowingly, that means we get caught up in some cycle of injustice

My friends, a question for you here mid-message:

Where are you currently selling out your birthright (or tempted to sell out your birthright) as someone made in God's image in order to short-cut your way to getting something that you think you want or need right now?

Zacchaeus is participating in this in a very public, obvious way as he's actively participating in the unjust system created by the Romans and as he's benefiting from it very lucrative ways

And then Jesus comes along, and *his whole goal is to break the cycle of image-bearers forfeiting their birthright in order to get what is expedient or gratifying*

So what does he do with Zacchaeus and with you and me to break this cycle? What does he introduce into this system in order to break it down?

Jesus introduces mercy into this cycle of injustice: "I must stay at your house today."

In first-century Palestine, eating with someone, being in someone's home, conferred dignity and blessing on them—especially if it was an esteemed teacher who came to your home

Jesus is the celebrity teacher, and he goes to eat with the hated tax collector

Jesus introduces mercy into Zacchaeus's participation in the cycle of injustice

Jaime talked about this so very well last week: mercy requires proximity to people and the problems. Mercy requires relationship. God's mercy required Jesus to touch and engage with people that nobody else touched or engaged with

Now this is very, very risky business. Because mercy is strong but not necessarily in ways that motivate people to change

Because when you introduce mercy to people who are sinning, it can be interpreted that it justifies me as I already am.

This happens all the time—"See! Jesus came to my house! Maybe that means being a tax-collector isn't all that bad!"

"The Bible says that God offers us grace and accepts us just as we are—so that means I'm fine just the way I am! No need to change anything about me!"

See, ***fallen human beings are self-justifying machines.***

Many of us will take whatever scrap of evidence that we can find to prop ourselves up and to convince ourselves and everyone around us

That who we are what we're doing is okay to make us feel better about us without having to change anything about us

"I'm a good person—I go to church, I volunteer, I post about the right issues on social media, I'm a good parent, I've been successful at work, I've made a difference in all these ways"

Human beings are self-justifying machines. In our fallen nature all is not right with us but we want and need to feel like it is. And so we try to look for evidence in our own performance that we're okay, that our existence is justified.

But problem is we're not okay just as we are. All of us were made for so much more. And it doesn't actually make us nobler, wiser, stronger people to ignore that

It makes us smaller and less human when we expend our energies trying to justify who we already are and what we're already doing

Rather than accept the invitation to become who God intended us to be

There is a risk with Jesus extending mercy to Zacchaeus—the risk being that Zacchaeus could use this bit of evidence in his own self-justification project

Jesus never extends mercy to support our self-justification project, Jesus always extends mercy to propel God's image-bearing restoration project.

Now notice, that this tendency we have to be self-justifying machines is playing in the same ballpark that we opened with: justice, self-justification, these are all drawing from the same Latin root word

To make things right, to be right, to set things right, to be righteous.

We want to be right. We want to feel that we're in the right. We want to be justified.

But we're not justified in and of ourselves. We're fallen. And Jesus didn't come to prop up our self-justification project, he came to justify us through his own blood, through his own sacrifice

We will spend our lives in one of two ways: we'll either spend it trying to justify ourselves and our existence

OR we will receive the justification Jesus offers us and from that new standing as one who is already justified freely by God's grace and mercy, we become instruments of justice and renewal in our world

Here in Zacchaeus's story the mercy of Jesus takes a very personal form: "I'm going to your house today!"

And the question hanging over Zacchaeus in this moment is what will do with the mercy shown to him? Will he use it as an excuse to justify his behavior or will it spark him to repentance and change?

Here's how the rest of the story unfolds—as the people are murmuring about Jesus going to Zacch's house, and here's how Z responds:

⁸ But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount."

⁹ Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰ For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

This past week we lost a giant of a leader when **John Lewis passed away**

He was a civil rights leader who served in Congress from 1987-2020—33 years!

But what really put him on the map in our nation was that Lewis was one of the "Big Six" leaders of groups who organized the 1963 March on Washington.

In 1965, Lewis led the Selma to Montgomery marches across the Edmund Pettus Bridge where he was brutally attacked along with many other protestors

And this week someone shared this quote with me, a close friend talking about Lewis:

"He *believed* what we talk about, and he lived it every day of his life....And he didn't have a violent streak in his body. And he was always forgiving, always loving, always understanding. **And he never made you feel guilty. But he made you feel responsible."**

I think this is something of how it was with Jesus—he believed what he talked about, lived every day of his life, always forgiving, loving, and understanding

AND: he didn't make you feel guilty, but he made you feel responsible

And I think this is what happened with Zacchaeus. We don't know what else Jesus said to him or how it all happened

But meeting Jesus made Zacchaeus take responsibility for loving his neighbor, exactly as the Scriptures he grew up with had called him to do

He gives half of what he owns to the poor—that's mercy

And then he says, "if I've cheated anyone" to which someone from the peanut gallery in the crowd says, "IF?!?!?! That's the whole gig!!!"

To which Zacchaeus says, "Yes, okay, anyone that I've cheated, I'll pay them back four times what I've taken from them."

That's justice

Lana Liu in the Connect Devotional this past week talked about the difference between retributive justice where people go to jail for the pain they inflict on someone else

And restorative justice, where you restore or repair or repay what you broke or what you stole

Zacchaeus takes responsibility for something he's done wrong—this is something we teach our kids: "If you make a mess, you clean it up!"

Taking responsibility for something that's yours to do rather than making excuses is one of the most ennobling and humanizing things any human being can do

Zacchaeus takes responsibility to correct an injustice that he's participated in. The whole Roman thing is unjust, he doesn't have the ability to fix all of that

But he can make things right, right where he is.

The injection of Jesus's mercy into Zacchaeus's life, far from pacifying him and reinforcing his previous life where he sold out his birthright in order to make a profit

The mercy of Jesus broke that vicious cycle and invited him into a virtuous cycle

Where Zacchaeus repents. Repentance means to make a u-turn, to change your mind about what's good, what matters most, how to live

And sometimes in Christian circles we make repentance way to cognitive and in our heads, but what Zacchaeus does is not just mental or cognitive but concrete and active

And notice Jesus's response to this whole thing: "This man too is a son of Abraham"—he gives him his birthright back, he restores him to his rightful place in the family of God

So let's go back to what we said earlier:

Jesus never extends mercy to support our self-justification project, Jesus always extends mercy to propel God's image-bearing restoration project.

Once Jesus sets us free from our self-justification project we're able to do what God made us to do: to participate in as image-bearers in God's justice and mercy project.

See, what it means to be image-bearers set on this planet is to express some aspect of God's character and God's will here on this earth as it is in heaven

Sin clogs that channel, keeps us from understanding what real justice looks like, what real mercy looks like, keeps us hung up on the wrong things

And so we need someone to forgive us our sins, to clean out that channel, to re-connect us to God so we can allow HIS understanding of what justice looks like to shape us and renew us

Throughout history there have been all sorts of revolutionary movements that have claimed to be on the side of justice

Czarist Russia was an unjust mess, so the Soviet Revolution was supposed to fix all that—only they replaced one unjust system with an even more broken and corrupt system!

In our own country, BOTH the right AND the left can sometimes use the word “justice” as a cover for their own agendas for power and control, failing to deliver anything remotely resembling the true justice God made us for

The call to those of us who are Christ-followers is to not fall for any political party's line on what justice looks like

Instead, we look to Jesus for what justice looks like. We look to the perfect image-bearer to understand what it means to hate what is evil, to be a part of his restoration project

And it always involves mercy—like here with Zaccheus, but that mercy isn't JUST soft

It was also mercy when Jesus arrives in Jerusalem, goes to the temple courts, sees that there are money changers who have set up shop in the court of the Gentiles, which gets in the way of Gentiles who have come to worship God

And so what does he do with that injustice? He makes a whip and drives them out—that, too, is mercy

“For the Son of Man [that's one of Jesus's favorite titles for himself] came to seek and to save the lost.”

Mercy does not negate accountability.

Jesus isn't papering over or pretending about what Zacchaeus has done or who he was—there's a genuine naming of him: he was lost! He was a sell-out and a crook! That's who he was—he was not okay just as he was

But now, because of the mercy of Jesus injected into his story, mercy AND justice has happened through Zacchaeus

Because 700 years before this story, the prophet Micah declared to a whole nation that was lost what it was exactly that the Lord required of his people: to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God

And so when Jesus comes, he himself acts justly, sets things right, makes things right wherever he goes

And he acts in such a way as to call the rest of us image-bearers to stop selling out our birthright and step into the people God intended us to be

Jesus injects mercy into Zacchaeus's story and the result in Zacchaeus is RESTORED to God's family, he repents, and what that results in is both mercy AND justice

And throughout history and to this day this has been the effect of Jesus's mercy through his followers—restored image bearers who abandon the self-justification project in order to participate in God's justice project

In the first several hundred years of the church, everywhere the church went, the plight of women, children, and slaves got better

Jesus died for all people, dignified all people, called all people to repent and participate in his kingdom coming, his will being done

The pagans thought certain categories of people were disposable—but Jesus-followers believed that no one was disposable from God's perspective

Over the past 200 years, Jesus followers have built schools and hospitals and orphanages NOT JUST for other Christians—lots of people and nations and states build schools and hospitals and orphanages for their own people or to make money

Christians have built those things to bless and serve people who were not a part of their own tribe—mercy and justice

John Newton was a slave trader who met the mercy of Jesus and spent the rest of his life fighting slavery

William Wilberforce was a wealthy member of parliament who became a Jesus follower and devoted his life literally to his dying day fighting for the abolition of the English slave trade

Most of the abolitionist movement in our country were Jesus-followers: Frederick Douglas to Harriet Tubman to Harriet Beecher Stowe to Sojourner Truth

All the way through of course to Dr. Martin Luther King

And we must say that the white church at just about every turn has largely rejected these brothers and sisters in Christ

Much of the white church at every turn missed that these were Christ followers whose vision for justice was more in line with Jesus's than the prevailing notions at the time

Chuck Colson was President Nixon's hatchet man, called 'the evil genius' by his fellow workers because he was ruthlessly willing to do whatever it took to win

He was a major part of the Watergate scandal and while on trial became a Jesus-follower, pleaded guilty and was sent to jail

While in jail, he became deeply concerned about the injustice perpetrated against incarcerated peoples

and when he got out his faith fueled a massive global ministry including prison reform bills here in the United States to make the treatment of prisoners more just

And of course this isn't just an American story

In the mid 1990's Archbishop Desmond Tutu chaired South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Project described explicitly as a RESTORATIVE JUSTICE effort

because they knew there was no way that the nation could move past decades of apartheid apart from a deliberate and direct engagement with the truth of how bad things had been

and a direct and deliberate effort to reconcile the nation

About 10 years before Desmond Tutu chaired that effort, he chaired a Christian organization called National Initiative for Reconciliation

It was a group committed to political reform and racial reconciliation in South Africa

On that committee was a young rising lawyer named Gary Haugen. Gary learned from Desmond Tutu what it looked like to be a Christian committed to justice in the world

He served as the lead investigator in the 1990's for the United Nations into the Rwandan genocide

And shortly after that he started International Justice Mission or IJM—one of the premier global prosecutors of human trafficking all over the globe, as a Christian organization they often work with missionaries who report human rights abuses like sex trafficking or child indentured servitude to them and they act on it

IJM has been featured in almost every major news media outlet and he won the national "Hero Award" during the Obama presidency for his work in ending human trafficking

Meanwhile, Brian Stevenson grew up in rural Delaware in the 1960's in the African Methodist Episcopal Church

Where he learned about Jesus and forgiveness, the dignity of each human being and where he witnessed how people cultivated resilience

He went on to become a lawyer and found his calling in working with death row inmates in Alabama where race plays a disproportionately impactful role in deciding who gets sent to death

His book "Just Mercy" became a major motion picture a couple of years ago and tells the story of his relentless work towards justice in our legal systems

When we meet Jesus's mercy, it frees us from our self-justification project as we receive God's restoration project

That frees us to participate in God's act justly and love mercy project

And sometimes that looks very specific and very personal: Zacchaeus giving back money he stole, apologizing and repaying specific people for damages we've done to them

And sometimes that looks like taking your talents and gifts and abilities and looking for where God might open doors for you to step in and do what God has called us all to do

To act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God.

Today's **Take-W.I.T.H.**

- 1. What do you think it looks like to abandon your self-justification project** [here's how I know I'm good! Here's how I feel justified or validated or important or significant in this great big world] , **embrace Jesus's restoration project in you, in order to participate in God's justice and mercy project around you?**

This is the spiritual transaction that Jesus invites us into that positions us to do the work that Micah 6:8 says that God requires

For some of us, even if we're passionate about justice, our vision and definitions of what justice means is clouded and tainted by our own need to justify ourselves

Rather than receiving God's justification of us which frees us up to understand his pictures and understanding of justice

- 2. Is there an issue of injustice that you're currently or previously participating in where you need to take a restorative step?**

Like Zacchaeus, some of us have done things that have exploited or used or abused other people.

And to be a Jesus follower requires repentance, requires that wherever possible we do what we can to make amends, to repair and restore what we took or how we hurt people.

- 3. Is there an issue of injustice in our world that registers on your radar that you've not put time and energy into yet? What might be a good first step?**

Our world is full of injustices, whether it's modern slavery or sex trafficking or child labor or injustice along racial and ethnic lines

And what happens for many of us we'll have something that registers a little more personally, a little more viscerally, but we're so busy and there's so much coming at us that we don't take the time to consider what it is we could do or should do

For just about every issue around the globe where injustice is occurring, there are people organizing to try to do something about it

And so I want to encourage you this week to take 30 minutes, Google around, and do some research about what you might do to make a difference in your local or in the global community.

2 minutes—take one of these and talk