

“Wise Living: Living Justly”
Proverbs 15: 27, 16:8, 11, 17:23-24,
22:15, 28: 5-6; and Matthew 23:19-26

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The Lord loves justice—that’s what it says in Psalm 37, verse 28, and again in Isaiah 61:8: *For I, the Lord, love justice.* If God says, “I love justice,” it’s one of those straightforward sentences. If God really cares about something, loves it, perhaps it’s worth thinking about. Certainly it’s one of those elements of Proverbs, for in this book of the Bible, this wisdom teaching suggests that justice is important.

It says if you’ve been listening to God, “then you will understand righteousness and justice and equity, every good path, for wisdom comes from your heart.” That comes from Chapter 2 in Proverbs.

Justice is part of the good path that God would have us be upon, so it might be worthwhile paying a little attention to justice. But what is justice? It almost feels like that’s the million dollar question. How do we define it? What is it? How do we live with it?

In the Old Testament the word for justice is *mishpat*. It’s one of the few Hebrew words I can say. It is a word that we could follow through the arc of scripture. It’s used 420 times in 403 verses throughout the Old Testament. Some people suggest that it is one of the themes of the Old Testament. It comes up in wisdom. It suggests that when one listens to God, and as one begins to get it, that is justice, then one becomes more wise. It is part of the wisdom that God would give us. So it’s there and it’s common in the Old Testament, but what does it mean?

One of the meanings for justice is to be consistent with what you say you would do. There’s something about getting attention in there that needs to fit, so it’s kind of like paying attention to what we’ve said we would do, having a proper relationship to the promise we’ve made, or having a proper relationship to what people know is appropriate in our society, in the place we live or the group we’re with. So that’s kind of a general way of thinking about it.

Oftentimes in the Old Testament it gets a little more descriptive. It uses a metaphor suitable for an agrarian people. When they were trading things like grain and they wanted to make sure there was a fair trade, they would weigh it. And to weigh it, they would put it on the balance. So the balance becomes a symbol of being just. The trouble is that there are ways of getting around having an accurate balance. But when it’s accurate, then it’s just.

The struggle we have is that we don’t always want things to balance if we want the advantage, yet God, in Proverbs 16:11, suggests that “honest balances and scales are the Lord’s. All the weights in the bag are his work.” It’s that metaphor. When it’s honest, when it’s balanced correctly, it begins to help us see how the idea of justice is

one of integrity and fairness, caring that things balance out, that they are good for both parties, that they are appropriate.

That's why I think the word *justice*, as it goes on, begins to mean judgment because when somebody brought a question to the elders and they're trying to decide, what are they basing that decision on? Whether the parties involved have been fair, whether they've lived up to their promises, whether they've done what is right in the community, or whether they've cheated. So justice begins to have this sense of judgment to it, as well. We judge whether it's right.

But as we hear, it's a calling as well—to live into justice. It's put this way: "Better is a little with righteousness than a large income with injustice." (Proverbs 16:18) The relationship between righteousness and justice is very close as well. Healthy relationships with one another are related to justice. Those words are very close. Sometimes they are even used as synonyms because the idea of justice is that we deal with one another with integrity, with caring for each other. It's not about indulging ourselves or being greedy.

It feels to me that thinking about justice is very contrarian in our own society in some ways. Listen to the advertisements these days. I was listening to Pandora last night, and one came on that said, "You want the fast car, so get the fast car. Indulge yourself." So many of the advertisements suggest "indulge yourself; give in to your greed so that you will give your money to us." Beyond that, the suggestion is that we will be happy if we just indulge ourselves. The feeling is that God is leading us to something different. Justice is about having integrity and being fair and caring about one another, the least among us.

I want to suggest that there is a reason for this. There is a wisdom to justice. How many of you have seen the movie, "It's a Wonderful Life"? It's a 1942 movie that I associate with Christmas. Jimmy Stewart is the main character, George Bailey. (He's been gone a few years, so some people may not know who he is.) It's a story about a man who is about to kill himself because of events that he feels have destroyed all he's ever worked for. A bumbling angel comes to try to convince him otherwise, and he does it by showing him what would have happened had he not ever been alive. He saved his brother. He helped this little town have a Savings and Loan that helped the least among them. He sees what the town would have become had he not been there.

Of course, the evil character is Mr. Potter, who just wants to take money from everyone and keep it for himself. There's always this conflict between them. That's what it's about. If George Bailey hadn't been there, the town would have become something called Pottersville, a place full of sin, iniquity, degradation. George sees the people who are meaningful in his life having very constricted lives. Some of them have even passed away because what he had done for the community wasn't there. It's a parable about justice. It's about what happens when somebody lives with integrity and fairness and cares about the people around him, and what happens to people having that kind of care and being taken care of.

George always had dreams of going on this grand adventure, doing something big and wonderful. But it doesn't work out that way for him. But after walking through what would have happened if he had not been there, he realized what a wonderful life he had had and how it had made many people's lives wonderful.

This reminds me of another story about two woodland birds.

"Tell me the weight of a snowflake," a tufted titmouse asked a wild dove.

"Nothing more than nothing," was the answer.

"In that case, I must tell you a marvelous story," the titmouse said.

"I sat on the branch of a fir tree, close to its trunk, when it began to snow—not heavily, not in a raging blizzard—no, just like a dream, without a sound and without any violence. Since I did not have anything better to do, I counted the snowflakes settling on the twigs and needles of my branch. Their number was exactly 3,741,952. When the 3,741,953rd dropped onto the branch, — nothing more than nothing, as you say, — the branch broke off."

Having said that, the titmouse flew away.

The dove, since Noah's time an authority on the matter, thought about the story for awhile, and finally said to herself, "Perhaps there is only one person's voice lacking for peace to come to the world."

As I was looking for a story to help us think about justice, so many of them were about people like Martin Luther King, Jr., or Mahatma Gandhi, or somebody who had done something incredibly well-recognized. I think that's often the problem I have with justice. I feel like I'm never going to be a Mahatma Gandhi or Martin Luther King. I don't think I'm ever going to be the one who gives the "I Have a Dream" speech. Sometimes I wish we could just solve those big justice problems. That's what I tend to worry about—those big justice problems. And yet when I think about that parable of the movie "It's a Wonderful Life," I begin to realize it's not just about those big problems and that perhaps it is a little more like the snowflake story. If each of us lived with integrity and fairness and care for others it would create a world more like George Bailey's town than Pottersville. The trouble is getting there. It's so easy to get distracted or not want to speak up.

Proverbs doesn't really get us off the hook. Proverbs 31:8-9 says: "Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute. Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and the needy." It's hard to live each day with integrity and fairness and a care for others that shows as we walk through our lives. I know for myself that I can't do it on my own. Getting clean from the inside out, as Jesus talks about it; allowing it to be who I am. There's a barrier there, and the barrier for me is that worry about whether it will work, whether it really is the right thing given all the talk around us about how I should go after what I want and not worry about the other, or that

we should just make our own group and divide ourselves off from the rest of those folks, whoever those folks are.

There's a story about Martin Luther King. One night he had just been given leadership of the Montgomery Civil Rights group and had gotten some very hateful phone calls. One said that they were going to destroy him. They were going to bomb him and they were going to "take care" of him and his family—destroy them. He was afraid, and he said, "I don't think I can do this." He sat down and prayed. He points to that moment—that prayer when he felt God's promise, felt God's gift of grace, God saying He would be with him—as what then allowed him to go on and do the rest of what he did, to be a leader in the Civil Rights movement.

You see, I think for all of us there's that struggle with how do we do what is right. For me, it begins with a simple trust in God, a trust that God loves justice and that as we live righteously and justly, it does change the world and we never know how much our snowflake is going to affect the way the world works. But as each of us follow God's will for our lives to care for one another with integrity and fairness, we change the world because we have a God who loves justice and wants to give us a good life. Amen.