

A Call for Justice

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[0 : 00] Thank you.

I hope it didn't scare anyone there just now. But if you're, I don't know if there's anyone in this room that's old enough who might have actually heard that in person.

Anybody? Anybody know what that sound is? Steven, you must have been old enough. What is that? Airstrike. Very good. You must have heard, where did you learn that?

Hmm. I guess they still might use that sound in different places.

But that should be a replica sound, what you heard of an air raid siren. And if you lived in Britain during the Second World War, that would have been a very familiar sound.

[1 : 25] The sound of enemy aircraft coming. A warning, a call for you to stop. Because danger is imminent.

Destruction is at your doorstep. A call to stop, to listen, to respond. And even though I'm guessing in Isaiah he did not have the benefit of an air raid siren, there's a very familiar, very similar sense of urgency that we see in the opening of our scripture passage today.

God tells Isaiah, cry aloud. Don't hold back. Lift up your voice like a trumpet.

Now in biblical times, the trumpet was used as a warning, as an alarm, as a sound to call, to rally the people of Israel, to listen, to get people's attention.

Because God's message to his people is very serious. Like the British in World War II, the Israelites were in the midst of war.

[2 : 38] But it wasn't a war from a foreign invasion. It wasn't a war from someone coming from outside. It was a war brewing within them. The enemy was within their own hearts.

And that is why God says, declare to my people their transgression. Because the people, they are in rebellion. The series that we're in on Isaiah and on mission, different calls to mission, it's all set in the backdrop of this time in the Old Testament where Isaiah is prophesying to Israel.

Because God, here's the back story if you've missed the last couple weeks. God has brought Israel, his people, into relationship with him.

And he has called his people to be a servant. His servant to serve him and to serve all the nations. That's what the call, the message of Isaiah is.

But as we know, as we've probably heard if you've read any of the Old Testament, the people constantly fail over and over again.

[3 : 52] They go and they find their idols. They get, you know, tempted away and lured away. And they forget their God. And they keep failing this call to be the servant to the nations, to serve God.

But God's plans are never thwarted. And he graciously, lovingly brings them back again and again and again. And towards the end of the book, towards the end where we're reading in these last few weeks, from chapter 50 onwards, we get these amazing images of salvation.

Not just for Israel, but to all people. And so if you were here the last few weeks, you've heard that we have this call to the thirsty. God is saying, come to me, all who are thirsty.

There's a call to the outsider. God is using his people to bring restoration, to bring healing to all the nations.

All of the earth. But even as we unpack this passage that we read today, we see that there is still this massive discrepancy, this massive gap between the mission that God has called us to and the people of God and whether they're actually living out that mission.

[5 : 16] And this disconnect, this gap, this discrepancy is why Isaiah or Isaiah is sounding the alarm. He's blowing the trumpet, the air raid siren for us to stop and listen because the situation is really, really bad.

And we as God's people, just like in those days, we need to stop. We need to listen. And the call for us is to respond. Because the people of God appear to be serving him.

They appear to be worshiping him. But whether they realize it or not, they're actually living in sin. And that's why God says to Isaiah, declare to my people their transgression.

So let's begin with a few questions here. This little interactive poll here.

How many of you fast? Anybody fast regularly? Not just fasting for, you know, dietary purposes or to lose weight.

[6 : 30] Like fasting as a spiritual practice, as religious practice. If any of you guys are not familiar, fasting is basically, in a spiritual sense, it's basically where you stop eating for a time.

And during that time, it's really a time for you to focus on God, to pray. So does anybody do that regularly? I know I don't. Okay, maybe that's a little foreign to some of us.

But how about, how many of you guys take communion? You know, when we have the Lord's Supper, the bread. How many of you guys? Okay, okay. Don't be bashful. I can see some hands there. How many of you guys attend worship services regularly?

Okay, okay. Everybody's hands are pretty much be up there. So the point is, the point is with these, because in the passage, actually fasting isn't really the main issue.

So today we're not really going to delve into the issue of fasting. So if you have no idea what fasting is, and if you've never done it in your life, it's okay. Because fasting in this passage is actually an example.

[7 : 38] It's just an indication of a religious practice, a spiritual discipline. And why do we know that? Because later on in the passage, Isaiah talks about Sabbath, another really important spiritual observance.

So the issue here isn't really fasting and Sabbath or whatnot. Because we can replace that with a number of religious activities or rituals that we just talked about.

Just like the questions I asked you. So if you're here today and you're not a Christian or you've never done any of those practices before, Isaiah still has a message for you.

He still has a message for us. Because he wants you to know that God isn't more or less happy just because you're sitting here in church. These aren't holy chairs where you sit and suddenly you kind of start absorbing God's grace.

That's an external activity. And God is concerned about your heart. So there's a message for you. So please continue to listen. And I want to just be clear before we really dig in.

[8 : 45] I'm not saying in the passage any of these activities are bad. Isaiah is not saying that fasting is bad or reading your Bible is bad or taking communion is bad or observing the Sabbath is bad.

Those are actually all good things. So he's not knocking those things. But Isaiah is saying, he's saying to the people of God, to Israel, that something can be very missing even when you're doing all these great things.

Something crucial is missing from the religion of God's people. And that missing ingredient is righteousness.

There's no righteousness. And that's the first point of our sermon today. Unrighteous religion. Unrighteous religion.

Because God's people are very sincere. They're very religious. Unrighteous. But it's fundamentally unrighteous. So let's take a look at the word unrighteous.

[9 : 49] The concept. You know, it's a big word. But if you really boil it down, if you really distill it, it's actually pretty simple. Righteousness is ultimately about right relationships.

Right relationships. Relationships where all the expectations, all the requirements are being fulfilled. And that's why we easily call God righteous.

A righteous God. Because the way he relates to us, the way he treats us is perfect. You know, in the Trinity, the Father, Son, and Spirit, there's this perfect community.

A righteous community. And if you can imagine with me an earthly community. Maybe a church. That is where people are perfectly loving.

Where no one is in any need whatsoever. I know that might be hard to imagine. But just imagine with me a neighborhood, a community of people.

[10 : 48] That's a righteous people. Because they are relating with each other in perfect harmony. Perfect peace. Perfect love.

So when we think about the issue of righteousness, the first thing we need to reckon with as people is our relationship with God.

You know, God tells us that we've failed to love him. We've failed to serve him the way that we've been created to do. As we've been learning the last couple weeks, we're all created to thirst for something.

We're all thirsting for something that will truly quench that desire in our hearts. And God is telling us only he can quench it. He is the relationship of relationships that we need.

And that's what we've been learning about the last couple weeks. That's what we need to remember before we think about anything to do with righteousness or justice.

[11 : 50] Our relationship with God. And that's why in verse 2, we see so clearly that it makes sense. It's an issue of righteousness. Verse 2, God says, They delight to know my ways as a nation that did righteousness and did not forsake the judgment of their God.

They ask of me righteous judgments. They delight to draw near to God. The people delight to draw near. It really seems great on the surface, doesn't it?

You know, these people seek God. They delight to know their ways. They delight to know his ways. But obviously something is wrong here, isn't there?

Because we can be very sincere in our religion, but at the same time still be completely unrighteous.

On some level, we think, you know, we can be doing the right thing with all these Christian activities. And supposedly seeking God.

[13 : 03] You know, I'm playing music up here. I'm worshiping God. I'm singing with a clear voice. I'm lifting my hands. I'm putting money in the offering box. I'm fasting.

I'm praying. I'm reading my Bible. One chapter a day without fail. Ten chapters for some of you without fail. I'm on the one chapter side, to be honest.

I'm a pagan. I'm praying. I can still see times in my life where I was trying to do the right thing. And maybe you can identify, too. I was trying to do the right thing.

I thought I was righteous. And just like those Israelites, I was like, God, look at what I did. And I'm like, God, why haven't you seen what I'm doing?

Why isn't this making a difference? Don't you hear? Don't you see what I'm doing? Don't you see what I'm doing? But then I realized I had failed to grasp that true righteousness is something different.

[14 : 06] Yes, yes, I was going to God. Yes, I was looking at the cross. Yes, I was even seeking his righteous judgments. Yes, I was even delighting to know his ways.

But the reason I went to him ultimately was to serve my own agenda. It was selfish. And so in this passage, God exposes those selfish motives.

He says to the people in verse 3, Behold, in the day of your fast, you seek your own pleasure. In all your religious practices, you're actually seeking your own agenda, your own heart, your own desires, not mine.

All those outward acts of fasting, they're all selfish rituals. So the people can say to God, God, look, look at what we're doing.

We deserve your blessing. We've earned it. And you may never have actually said that to God. I think very few people would so outwardly declare that. But think about it.

[15 : 16] Think about it in your heart when you felt that discontentment because God has not satisfied. God has not provided what you wanted. Even though you did all the right things, you checked off all the religious boxes.

But true righteousness, that right relationship with God, it's about delighting in God himself. It's about receiving his love.

It's about receiving his unconditional love and responding to him in love. And the way you love someone, think about it, the way you love someone, isn't it about getting to know them?

Isn't it about understanding them? And church, I'm afraid. I'm afraid in my own heart and in our hearts that we get so wrapped up in our personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

You know, it's 95% about personal and 5% about Jesus. That relationship is apparently there, but all I'm thinking about deep down is me.

[16 : 24] It's more about us than God. Think about someone you love, you really love. Hopefully everyone can at least think about one person here.

You know, it could be a parent, a sibling, a child, a spouse, a close friend. A right relationship is about just discovering and getting to know that person's character and what they love, isn't it?

And really letting that resonate with you. So that's our second point. It's a righteous religion.

A righteous religion that God is pointing us to. Because a righteous religion looks to God and says, God, you've already given me everything.

I don't have to earn your love. So what do you care about, God? What do you love? Who do you love? God. God.

[17 : 24] God. God. God. And while God tells us that he loves all people, he loves all creation, there's an unmistakable pattern in his word. An unmistakable clarity in what he tells us is that he has a particular heart for the poor and the oppressed.

He has a particular heart for issues of justice and injustice. The poor and the oppressed, they are the people who suffer because of unrighteousness, because of a broken relationship in society, in our city, in our world, just like we prayed about.

In Deuteronomy 10, God says that he is a God who defends the cause of the fatherless, defends the cause of the widow.

He loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing. And in ancient times, the orphan, the widow, the immigrant, those were the poorest and most vulnerable groups in society.

And God is categorically saying, I love every single one of these vulnerable groups. The weakest of the weak, the most marginalized, the most voiceless.

[18 : 43] I love them. Proverbs 14, God says, whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their maker. But whoever is kind to the needy, he honors God.

It's pretty profound, don't you think? That God identifies with the poor to such an extent that the way we treat them is equivalent to how we treat God.

That might sound familiar to some of you who are familiar with the Gospels. Because in Matthew 25, Jesus describes judgment day.

A judgment day when we'll all stand before him and he'll divide us into two groups. A clear division. The goats on one side and the sheep on the other.

The righteous on one side and the unrighteous on the other. I'm not saying this half is unrighteous, but just bear with me with the illustration.

[19 : 49] Imagine with me. Imagine with me if this half were the goats. And what will he say? The issue, the foundation, the basis of that division is that the righteous loved the poor and the unrighteous did not.

And no matter what the unrighteous say, the Lord will say to them, if you did not love the poor, if you did not feed them, if you did not clothe them when they were naked, if you did not visit them when they were sick, then no matter what you say, you cannot say that you love me.

Those words don't matter. And we know in that passage, Jesus was probably referring to poor Christians, but the heart, the principle of that is God's looking to see if we have his heart for the poor.

If we have his heart for the marginalized. And I want to be very clear here, lest there's any misunderstanding.

Jesus isn't saying that our love for the poor saves our souls. He's not saying that, you know, if we give enough to the poor, if we've reached that \$10,000 or \$1 million plateau in our lifetime, we've suddenly entered into heaven.

[21 : 17] It's not our acts that make us acceptable to God. But God says if you have genuine faith, if you have that right relationship within, if you love the way he loves, if you've understood his heart for the poor, then it is inevitable.

It is inevitable that you will respond to the things that he cares about. So the hard question that we have to ask ourselves this morning is that if you don't see that active love for the poor in your life today, do you really know the God that you claim to worship?

Do you really understand him? And that's why in this passage, Isaiah now claims and proclaims that there is a thing called true fasting, the right way to respond to God's love and his heart, his call for people.

And it's not just to do these personal spiritual things as good as they may be. Verse 6, true fasting is to loose the bonds of wickedness.

Undo the straps of the yoke. Let the oppressed go free to break every yoke. A yoke is an agricultural concept, the yoke that covers the oxen to guide them.

[22 : 44] But it's also a burden. That's why we call them beasts of burden. So there's all these metaphorical yokes that are basically trapping people, that are forcing them to go a certain path.

And God is saying, break those yokes. Proclaim freedom. Isaiah continues, share your bread with the hungry. Bring the homeless in.

Cover the naked. And don't hide yourself from your own flesh. Because righteous religion is not just personal piety.

It's not just this thing we do at home to look good, to feel good. Righteous religion is a call for justice. And that's the third point.

It's a call for justice. So the reason why a love for the poor is actually an issue of justice, you know, it's not just the thing where we're like, yeah, let's give a little bit of money to the person on the street.

[23 : 46] Let's show some mercy to them. Let's be charitable. I'm not saying those things are bad. But God's saying it's an issue of justice. Because God is all about righteous judgments.

And that's what the people are seeking in verse 2, remember? They're seeking God's righteous judgments. And we can have a negative impression of the word judgment.

You know, don't be so judgmental, etc., etc. But actually, the Hebrew word for judgment is the same word for justice. Mishpat. So if we're doing justice, if we're actually making these righteous judgments, we're actually understanding God's heart to make right all the relationships of the world all throughout creation.

And the problem with poverty, the problem with oppression and vulnerability and marginalization is they actually break those relationships.

They actually fracture society. They actually fracture the right relationships that God desires. And that's not how he created the world. So therefore, justice is how we get back to right relationships.

[25 : 06] It's what corrects the brokenness and brings us back to righteousness. So how do we answer the call to justice? Verses 6 and 7.

And at first glance, that list can seem pretty daunting, doesn't it? All those things that Isaiah is calling us to do. But if we break it down, we can basically see four major areas of human need that Isaiah identifies here.

And I think it's very poignant. Four major areas. The first and foremost, it's the need for freedom. A freedom from bondage. A freedom from oppression.

And then there's the need for food, right? He said feed the hungry. There's a need for shelter. Bring the homeless in. And there's a need for clothing.

Cover the naked. I think food, shelter, and clothing are pretty self-explanatory. So I really want to just zero in on freedom. Because freedom is that big one. And note how Isaiah, he repeats it four times in verse 6.

[26 : 14] Loose the bonds of wickedness. Undo the straps of the yoke. Let the oppressed go free and break every yoke. So what do we make of that?

What is this freedom all about? I mean, the straightforward answer is there's millions of modern-day slaves in the world today. That's a very easy example.

That's straightforward. And even in Hong Kong, you know, a recent report said that one in six domestic helpers are living in conditions of forced labor.

One in six. Is that someone you know? Is that someone you've heard about? Is that someone in your own sphere of influence? And bondage and oppression, it can come in so many forms, right?

So maybe we need to step out. We need to open our eyes and see where is the oppression, the bondage in my life today.

[27 : 16] You know, we're not just racehorses with these blinders kind of chasing after this one personal goal. The spiritual journey is meandering. It's a journey. It's step by step.

So we're able to look around at the world, at the city, at our workplaces, and see where maybe is the abuse happening, the addictions happening. Where perhaps is there oppression and justice even in my company, even in my workplace, even in my home?

Where might that injustice be? And guys, when I was thinking about this, let's be honest, I felt really just overwhelmed because I love reading the news. I'm kind of a news junkie.

I love reading articles. And there's just so many stories, so many stats about the brokenness and the hurt and the injustice in our world today.

And it can be kind of paralyzing if we just let that fall on us. But I think we can all start with one step, one baby step even.

[28 : 23] You know, maybe it's giving generously to that love offering that we're collecting. Today is the final day. We're collecting this love offering to support ministries in Asia, in Hong Kong, that are helping the poor, that are helping the broken.

So maybe that's the first step for you. Maybe it's just for you to find a specific outreach ministry and find out, hey, how can I volunteer with you? Maybe it's just to stop and think about, keep your eyes open, do some research about why is there poverty in Hong Kong?

Why is there housing issues? Why is there beggars on the street? I mean, there's almost no excuse with Google these days in there. And if you don't like the internet, come ask me.

I might not be able to tell you the answers, but maybe we can journey together and figure it out. There is all a next step for us because if our worship of God in these two, three hours on every Sunday, if that is genuine, if that is authentic, then that will inevitably lead us to pursue justice this week.

You know, it might start really small. It might start as a mustard seed. But it must happen because Isaiah is telling us that there's no such thing as a Christian who does not pursue justice.

[29 : 46] That's an oxymoron. There's no such thing. Guys, I know, I'll be honest, I know, even if I'm honest with my own heart, I know there's so many obstacles, so many obstacles to the pursuit of justice.

Sometimes I just feel busy, just plain busy. Hong Kong is a busy place. I have family. I have friends. I have relationships. I have people to keep in touch with. And those are important things.

I understand. But sometimes I'm just apathetic and I just honestly don't really care. I'm so comfortable with my community.

I'm so, I love my CG. I love my church. I love my family. I'm so comfortable with them. I'm so happy with my circumstances. I don't want to get involved with the poor. It can be so messy.

It can be so difficult. Maybe even dangerous sometimes. And here is where we all need to remember that the call for justice, it's not just about doing stuff for the poor.

[30 : 58] It's not about just doing all these things and giving and giving and giving. The call for justice is actually a call to remember that the greatest issue of justice, the greatest issue of righteousness is still our relationship with God.

Because when we all. Because when we chose to reject God, when we chose to worship all these other things, we actually all became poor.

We all fell into poverty, into spiritually poverty. We lost our righteousness. That relationship with God was severed.

It's broken and we deserve to die, to be eternally separated from him. But God did the greatest act of justice by coming to us, by sending his son Jesus.

And so can you imagine, can you imagine what it would have been like if Jesus made the excuses? If he saw those obstacles to pursuing justice?

[32 : 17] I mean, let's be honest. I think Jesus was probably pretty busy ruling the universe. Right? If we're honest with ourselves. If anyone had an excuse, Jesus probably had it.

I'm ruling the universe, all the cosmos, all of creation. I can imagine he had pretty amazing community with the Trinity. Perfect love. I can imagine he probably had an amazing time every day with the angels.

It would have been bliss because that's heaven. I think our sin-filled world probably felt like a disgusting, dirty slum to him.

He probably could have looked over to these filthy, dirty people mired in their sin and said, Eh, not my problem.

I'm happy where I'm at. I'm happy. But Paul tells us in Philippians that Jesus, though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to.

[33 : 29] Instead, he gave up his divine privileges. He took the humble position of a slave. He was born as a human being.

And when he appeared in human form, he humbled himself in obedience to God, even to the point of dying a criminal's death on the cross.

The almighty God who created the universe and created us, he actually chose to become poor. Jesus was literally poor.

He was born into a feeding trough for animals in a barn, in a stable. Jesus was literally a refugee fleeing to Egypt from Herod's massacre.

Jesus was literally homeless. Foxes and dens have dens, have holes. Foxes and they have a place to rest.

[34 : 33] But the Son of Man has no place because in his earthly ministry, he was going from place to place and place. And he was homeless. He was a vagrant. Jesus was literally naked, stripped and beaten and hung on that cross.

Jesus was literally oppressed, tortured, executed for a crime that he was not guilty of. So God became poor for us.

God became poor to show us how much he loves us. Both the physically poor and the spiritually poor. Man, we were so poor and so helpless that Jesus had to come to save us.

And how humbling is that? That you were helpless. I was helpless. I could do nothing. And Jesus came to us. And if the God of the universe loves the poor so much that he came to be one of them, how could we not love them too?

How could we not see that we're no better than that beggar on the street? So guys, the call for justice always begins with a cross.

[35 : 48] God did the ultimate act of justice by paying the cost of sin so that we could be pardoned. So today, regardless of whether you're a Christian or not, wherever you fall in the spiritual spectrum in this room, the message is the same.

I hope you realize the futility, that futility of trying to earn God's favor. There's nothing you can do when you're spiritually bankrupt. I hope you realize that God created you for a purpose.

To be in relationship with him. To be satisfied by him perfectly. To be loved unconditionally by him. And to show his love to the world around you.

So we simply accept God's pardon. And we turn away from our old life. And we walk into that new life of righteousness. That right relationship with him.

And if you're a Christian here today, there's also a specific calling for us to remember. Do you really understand now God's heart for the poor?

[37 : 02] Isaiah is saying, do you see how God became poor for you? Is your faith in Jesus a genuine faith that inevitably leads to a passion for God's justice?

I want to conclude with one final point. Because everything we do, everything we reflect on, God is also saying there is a vision.

You don't kind of just do this with your head in the ground. I've given you an amazing vision. A vision for justice. And that's the fourth point.

Because when you're taking your first step in doing justice today, you know, whether you've maybe labored for your whole life in pursuing justice, or today is the first day you step out.

And that amazing journey of justice. Verses 8 to 12. I encourage you guys, go home and read it in detail. But I'll give you just a snapshot. Because it's an amazing vision of what happens when we understand God's love for us.

[38 : 12] Isaiah says that God makes us a light. He heals us. His presence is with us. He hears us. He guides us. He satisfies our deepest needs.

He strengthens our bodies. He makes us a spring of living water. He uses us to repair and to restore brokenness.

These are the ongoing blessings that come from righteousness, from living at a right relationship with God. But Isaiah is also pointing us to a future eternal vision.

And this is really important. He says, Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt. You shall raise up foundations of many generations. You shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to dwell in.

The work of justice is hard. If you've done it, it can be messy. You know what I'm talking about. There will be struggles. There will be failure.

[39 : 21] There will be heartbreak. People may not respond in the way that you lovingly want them to. But again, Jesus did justice for us.

And this is the vision that Isaiah gives us, that we're actually playing a little part in God's plan to restore all things. And Jesus will bring that into completion when he returns.

And so for now, it's an encouragement for us to not despair, to not lose hope. When fire breaks out in the community that we've been serving.

To say, God, you are sovereign. We will continue. Even though there are setbacks, we know that we are obeying you and you will make all things right. There is an eternal vision.

And as we answer that call to justice, we answer it in light of this vision for justice. That we will be called repairers and restorers because we're following Jesus Christ, who is the ultimate repairer, the ultimate restorer.

[40 : 26] So church, let's turn away from that unrighteous religion that says, God, I want to manipulate you in doing what I want.

That unrighteous religion where your personal relationship with Jesus is 90% about you and 10% about Jesus. Let's turn away from that, as Isaiah is calling us.

Let's turn to a righteous religion that is about God, that is about our relationship with him, that delights in his love for us, that recognizes us that we are loved unconditionally.

And let's answer that call for justice. Let's love the poor just like Christ did, with a vision that one day Christ will return.

And make all things right. He will bring complete restoration. And we'll have the privilege of being part of it. And above all, church, let's remember that justice, again, always begins with the cross.

[41 : 39] Because that was the greatest act of justice that the world will ever see. God's not asking you to run out and start throwing your money at the poor and do this and that and this and that and this and that.

He's not asking you to do those things as if it was just another item on your spiritual religious checklist to make him happy. Church, God is saying, gaze at the cross of Jesus.

He's asking you to remember what he did for you so that you begin to ask yourself this. If my Savior did this for me, if my God humbled himself and loves me so, then how could I not do the same?

How could I not love the same way? How could I not love the poor? How could I not do justice? How could we not?

I want to invite the communion stewards and the band to come up. And we're going to observe communion right now. And if there was ever a time to say, this is not just a ritual.

[43 : 13] This is not just a cracker and grape juice that I consume every two weeks in worship service. This is the time to do it. This is an opportunity for us to gaze at the cross and let the ritual overflow into reality, into a life changed.

It's an opportunity to say, what is the true fast? What is the true communion in our lives? Is it really just to have a piece of bread and to take the cup?

Or is that a life changed because God changes our life?