

Compassion & Justice in Jesus' Name

Mother's Day May 8, 2016

I'm going to begin my sermon this morning with a **WARNING**: If you are currently living a blissfully, happy and contented life, this message may throw a bit of a wrench in things. Now, you might be wondering, Pastor Jerry, have you forgotten that it's Mother's Day? Just what kind of a sermon are you planning to preach? Well, I'm glad you asked. Today's message is on Compassion and Justice. These are topics that can be a little unsettling. But, it's an appropriate topic because I've learned much of what I know about Compassion and Justice from many of the moms out there.

In our culture we have an understanding of a "momma bear and her cubs." You don't mess with the cubs. At least, not more than once you won't. You'll likely learn your lesson the first time. So, today's sermon is in honor of all those Mama Bears out there.



There's an emotional risk to sermons on Compassion and Justice. And there's a logical reason for this emotion. It shows up in the very definition of the words. Let's begin with Compassion.

Compassion can be defined as feeling sad about someone else's suffering and desiring to help.

Our God is a God of Compassion.

Psalm 116:5, "The LORD is gracious and righteous; our God is full of **compassion**."

Matthew 9:36, "When [Jesus] saw the crowds, he had **compassion** on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."

2 Corinthians 1:3, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the *Father of compassion* and the God of all comfort,"

These are just a few examples of the clear theme throughout Scripture that our God is indeed a God of Compassion.

As followers of Christ our God calls us to Compassion.

Colossians 3:12, "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, *clothe yourselves with compassion*, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience."

Philippians 2:1-4, "Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and **compassion**, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others."

Compassion, caring about the needs of others, is a hallmark of what it means to be a Christ follower. This is actually built into our church's statement of faith. We have 10 key statements that express what we believe about God. These are our key doctrines.

Article 8 talks about Christian Living: "...God commands us to love Him supremely and others sacrificially, and **to live out our faith with care for one another, compassion toward the poor and justice for the oppressed**. ...In obedience to Christ's commission, we are to make disciples among all people, always bearing witness to the gospel in word and deed."

Lately, it has really grabbed my attention how often compassion and justice are linked to each other. It's caused me to really meditate on what "Justice in Jesus' Name" is all about. So, now that we've looked briefly at Compassion, let's take an even closer look at Justice.

Justice can be defined as the fair and proper treatment of people irrespective of their class or position.

Justice is one of those words that is perhaps best understood through its antonym "injustice." It's a natural human tendency to get angry about injustice. What we refer to as a "sense of justice" is natural to all mankind. It's built in, hard-wired. It usually begins when we ourselves feel we've been slighted or treated unjustly. Our little brother or sister got a bigger **piece of cake** than us. Or, you have to share the last piece of cake with them and they didn't cut it into two equal halves – how dare they!

By the way, there's an easy solution to this one: you let the older child cut the piece of cake in half and then you let the younger child choose his/her half. Yes, only the wisdom of Solomon can solve such injustice!

Justice can be more narrowly defined in 3 ways:

1. First of all, **Criminal Justice**: Criminal Justice is setting things right by using the laws of the land to fairly punish crimes and protect the innocent.

But, in regards to Criminal Justice, who decides what's legal or illegal? How do we decide who to punish and how much to punish them?

And, very importantly, how do we genuinely protect the innocent?

2. **Social Justice** is another way of narrowing our definition: Social Justice is setting things right by creating access and opportunity within society for economic, political and social rights for all people, particularly those in greatest need.

But, in regards to Social Justice, exactly what economic opportunities are we talking about? And, how do we actually get them to everyone fairly or equally? Which political and social rights should be actual rights and which ones are unreasonable expectations stemming from entitlement?

3. The third way we can narrow our focus is to speak of **God's Justice**: God's Justice is setting things right by following God's design and plan for mankind.

Fortunately, in regards to God's Justice, we have a more exacting way of determining right and wrong. It becomes easier for us to agree on God's Justice because we are gathered here in Jesus' Name. And thus, we define right and wrong according to His written Word in the Bible. So, let's see what the Bible has to say about God's Justice. There are at least **130 references** in the Bible to Justice. But let's look at just a few:

Jeremiah 9:24, "but let the one who boasts boast about this: that they have the understanding to know me, that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, **justice** and righteousness on earth, for *in these I delight*," declares the LORD."

As it turns out, **Our God delights in Justice.**

Psalms 9:16, "The LORD is known by his acts of **justice**..."

Psalms 45:6, "Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever; a scepter of **justice** will be the scepter of your kingdom."

Our God is a God of Justice. And He calls His people to be just.

God calls His people to Justice.

In the Old Testament book of Amos, God's people are called to account by God for their sins:

Amos 2:6-7a, "This is what the LORD says: "For three sins of Israel, even for four, I will not relent. They sell the innocent for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals. They trample on the heads of the poor as on the dust of the ground and deny **justice** to the oppressed..."

Actually, the Old Testament book of Amos has a lot to teach us about Justice. Amos wrote at a time when Israel was at a point of political power and wealth. But Israel had also grown complacent in its luxury and ease.¹ Frankly, it sounds not too far from our situation in modern-day America.

God calls His people back to justice. By the way, this is shortly before Israel gets sent into exile. Let's consider some more verses from Amos on the topic of Justice:

Amos 5:7, 10-15b, "There are those who turn **justice** into bitterness and cast righteousness to the ground... There are those who hate the one who upholds **justice** in court and detest the one who tells the truth. You levy a straw tax on the poor and impose a tax on their grain. Therefore, though you have built stone mansions, you will not live in them; though you have planted lush vineyards, you will not drink their wine.

For I know how many are your offenses and how great your sins. There are those who oppress the innocent and take bribes and deprive the poor of **justice** in the courts. Therefore the prudent keep quiet in such times, for the times are evil. Seek good, not evil, that you may live. Then the LORD God Almighty will be with you, just as you say he is. Hate evil, love good; maintain **justice** in the courts."

A while later, in **Amos 5:21-24**, God says, "I hate, I despise your religious festivals; your assemblies are a stench to me. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them.

¹ We are told that Israel and Judah were "enjoying great prosperity and had reached new political and military heights." But, they were far from God and they were choosing "extravagant indulgence in luxurious living, immorality, corruption of judicial procedures and oppression of the poor." NIV Study Bible, 2011, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, p. 1469.

Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let **justice** roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!"

And then, the true spiritual state of God's people is laid bare, **Amos 6:1** says, "Woe to you who are **complacent** in Zion..." Not long after this, God's people are judged for their sin and sent into Assyrian captivity for many, many long years.

In 2016, here at E-Free Bemidji:

May we not be found among the complacent, who become aware of suffering and injustice and do nothing to oppose it!

May we not be among those who lose sight of God's justice and fail to show compassion for the poor and justice for the oppressed!

May this kind of evil have no foothold in our own personal lives or in our spheres of influence!

May our gatherings here at E-Free Bemidji not become a stench to God!

Earlier I mentioned that **Compassion** is feeling sad about someone else's suffering and desiring to help. I would contrast that now by saying that **Justice** is feeling mad about someone else's suffering and desiring to help. I began this sermon by stating that there's an emotional risk to sermons on Compassion and Justice. The reason for this is in the very definition of the words.

Once compassion and justice have truly made you feel mad or sad, indifference is no longer an option. A blissfully, contented good life in America, will no longer satisfy you. Both justice and compassion illicit a response of the will, "I'm going to do something about this!" **Complacency must be replaced by action.**

I want to tell you the **Story of Eva**. This true story illustrates for us that poverty goes beyond a lack of money. Poverty is also a lack of power; it's a lack of the ability to defend oneself.

I was listening to a sermon podcast by Timothy Keller and in it he told a story about Dr. Robert Linthicum. Robert or Bob is a former Director of World Vision International's Urban Advance. Back in 1957, Bob was a very young pastor working in the inner city and he met a 14-year old young woman named Eva. She came from a broken family surrounded by crime and drugs. Eva was a beautiful woman. But Eva became radiant when she came to know Christ.

There was a gang in her area that recruited young girls from the projects to be prostitutes for wealthy white men in the suburbs. She told Bob about this; about the terrible pressure she was under to join the gang.

Bob said, well, Eva, you can't do that! You must resist evil. Then, Pastor Bob needed to go away for a while. When he came back Eva was no longer attending the Bible study. So finally he tracked her down and talked with her and she said "I gave in; I'm working with them." Unsympathetically, Bob replied "how could you give in to them!?"

Eva went on to explain that first of all they had threatened to beat up her father and then they did. Then, they said they'd beat up her brother and he ended up in the hospital. Then, they said that they would sexually assault her mother. She couldn't let this happen so she gave in and joined them.

Bob responded, "Why didn't you go to the police?" Eva responded, "Bob, who do you think THEY are?" And then Bob realized that a small part of the police dept. was running a prostitution ring.

The point of sharing this story is to illustrate that oftentimes poverty is connected to powerlessness. This kind of evil is the result of someone else's sin not a victim's unwillingness to resist. People who are in situations like Eva need our help.

They need us to bring Justice and Compassion in Jesus' Name. Because Eva was poor, they were able to take whatever they wanted to from her. She was oppressed and couldn't defend herself.

I'm sorry to tell you that there are thousands of stories like this, some right here in our own town of Bemidji. Sin has made a mess of our world.

But, **the good news** is that "in Jesus' Name" we can bring Compassion and Justice to the hurting and oppressed.

In Proverbs 31, King Lemuel gets some great advice from his mother, **Proverbs 31:8-9**, "Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and **judge fairly; defend** the rights of the poor and needy."

As God's People, we are called to justice. **We can't do everything, but every one of us can do something.** Let's consider some ways that we can join God today.

PURCHASE A SHRISHTI PRODUCT

This morning we have a table set up in the Fellowship Hall covered with products that were made by women who are either at risk or escaping from the sex trade. The ongoing development of sustainable business opportunities is crucial for ministering to women in these situations.

SUPPORT LEGAL JUSTICE MEASURES

One group that I am just learning about is called the **International Justice Mission**. They do legal casework around the world for poor and oppressed people. Stop by their table this morning to read stories and learn more. IJM is highlighted as 1 of 10 non-profits “making a difference” by U.S. News/World Report.

Let’s make that our goal here locally. One day, could E-Free Bemidji be known as 1 of the top 10 churches making a difference in Bemidji? What an awesome way to bring God glory!

PRAY

There is a **Prayer Card** in your bulletin this morning showing you how to pray for Compassion and Justice efforts. Place that Prayer Card in your Bible or on your mirror and lift these needs up to God.

SUPPORT LOCAL COMPASSION/JUSTICE INITIATIVES

Bemidji has many agencies and ministries that work toward compassion and justice. These include Servants of Shelter, the Beltrami Area Suicide Prevention Program, Food Shelf, Churches United, Soup Kitchen, Northwood’s Pregnancy Care Center, foster care and adoption services, Evergreen Shelter, Village of Hope, the Hope House, Habitat for Humanity/ReStore, Northwood’s Coalition for Family Safety, Timber Bay, Boys/Girls Club, Hands of Action, Operation Christmas Child, etc.

This month we were honored to participate in providing 34 Mother’s Day Gift Bags for area moms in local shelters. This is organized and promoted right here is our church by our very own Women’s Ministry. Way to be E-Free Bemidji!

You can’t do all of these, but are there one or two you could support with your time, talent, or treasure?

SPONSOR A CHILD

There are many great agencies and ministries who organize child sponsorships around the world. 2 of them are in our Fellowship Hall this morning:

1. Compassion Int’l.

One thing that I really love about Compassion is their mission statement: “Releasing children from poverty in Jesus’ name.”

2. Global Fingerprints

What I love about Global Fingerprints is that it is part of Reach Global with the EFCA. There is a great article about their ministry called, “Antidote to Human Trafficking.”² Read this article and you’ll see how child sponsorship is one of the best ways to fight back against human trafficking.

There are over 45 kids sponsored through our church by more than 33 different individuals/families right now. These children live in countries from El Salvador and Guatemala to the Congo and Rwanda, from Uganda to India and Indonesia. Why not take a stand and begin sponsoring a child today?

Galatians 6:9, “Let us not become weary in doing good...”

- If you are already involved in Compassion & Justice, press on!
- If you are not involved, pray about how you can begin practicing Compassion and Justice in Jesus’ name.

Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji, God has shown us what is good.

What does the LORD require of us?

That we act justly and that we love mercy

and that we walk humbly with our God. Amen. (Micah 6:8)

This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji
on May 8, 2016 by Pastor Jerry Johnson.

² Article on back page of the EFCA Today, Spring 2014.