

“Biblical Justice: Part 2”
Micah 3: Pt 1
July 4, 2021
Faith Presbyterian Church – Evening Service
Pastor Nicoletti

We return to the book of Micah tonight, and we need to begin with a review of where we are.

We started in the Book of Micah back in May, but then we went down a bit of a rabbit trail. Key to the opening chapters of the book is the concept of injustice. Which led to the realization that if we were going to accurately understand what the Book of Micah was getting at, we were going to need an accurate picture of what it, and what the Bible as a whole, means when it talks about justice in general, and societal justice in particular.

And the fact is that we don’t have a shared understanding of societal justice in our culture right now, and the major theories on offer – including the major theories argued by most Christians, are rooted primarily in assumptions of secular humanism.

And so, in the first sermon this topic, drawing from an article by Tim Keller, we examined the four more dominant secular justice theories in our culture right now, what they teach, what they get right, and where they go wrong. We talked about the critical or “postmodern” theory of societal justice, which focuses on dynamics of power. We talked about the utilitarian theory of societal justice which focused on maximizing human happiness. We talked about the liberal theory of societal justice, rooted in a certain concept of fairness. And we talked about the libertarian theory of societal justice, rooted in an individualistic concept of freedom.

And we noted a few things about each of these theories. First, since all of them were rooted in secular humanism, all of them, from the start, suffered from certain deficiencies, which led to ideas that eventually contradicted the Biblical picture of societal justice. Second, each one got at certain truths about societal justice, and sometimes truths that others missed. Now, that doesn’t mean that they all had an equal amount of truth or an equal amount of error. But each contained some portion of each, and so each had something to teach the others. But third, we recognized that if we were going to have a truly Biblical theory of justice, we needed to start differently than each of those theories started.

Because each of those theories started with human beings, and with certain principles about human beings, which then led to a specific theory of societal justice.

But what is interesting is that when the Bible in general, and when Micah specifically, talks about societal justice ... it doesn’t begin with human beings ... or with certain principles ... or with some sort of theory of justice. It begins, instead, with the person of God. Biblical justice is rooted in the character of God. It will have principles. And it will involve theoretical elements. And it will be about the lives of people. But its starting point – its foundation – is the character of God.

That is where we ended last time. And that is where we pick up tonight.

A few reminders and disclaimers before we do.

First, my ambitions on this sort of parenthetical series on justice in the middle of Micah are modest. The aim is to find the right starting point and sketch an outline of the way forward – not to produce a full-blown theology of societal justice.

Second, I'm sorry for the big gap since our last sermon on this topic. That was unintentional and unfortunate with how things shook out. And so, if you need a refresher on what we have already covered, that sermon is on the website.

And third, it was not intentional to return to this topic on the Fourth of July, so please don't read anything into that.

With all that said, let's begin with the picture Micah presents concerning societal injustice, as he pronounces judgment on God's people in Micah chapter three.

Please do listen carefully, for this is God's word for us this evening.

^{3:1} And I said:

Hear, you heads of Jacob
and rulers of the house of Israel!
Is it not for you to know justice?—
² you who hate the good and love the evil,
who tear the skin from off my people
and their flesh from off their bones,
³ who eat the flesh of my people,
and flay their skin from off them,
and break their bones in pieces
and chop them up like meat in a pot,
like flesh in a cauldron.

⁴ Then they will cry to Yahweh,
but he will not answer them;
he will hide his face from them at that time,
because they have made their deeds evil.

⁵ Thus says Yahweh concerning the prophets
who lead my people astray,
who cry "Peace"
when they have something to eat,
but declare war against him
who puts nothing into their mouths.

⁶ Therefore it shall be night to you, without vision,
and darkness to you, without divination.
The sun shall go down on the prophets,
and the day shall be black over them;

⁷ the seers shall be disgraced,
and the diviners put to shame;
they shall all cover their lips,

for there is no answer from God.
⁸ But as for me, I am filled with power,
with the Spirit of Yahweh,
and with justice and might,
to declare to Jacob his transgression
and to Israel his sin.

⁹ Hear this, you heads of the house of Jacob
and rulers of the house of Israel,
who detest justice
and make crooked all that is straight,
¹⁰ who build Zion with blood
and Jerusalem with iniquity.
¹¹ Its heads give judgment for a bribe;
its priests teach for a price;
its prophets practice divination for money;
yet they lean on Yahweh and say,
“Is not Yahweh in the midst of us?
No disaster shall come upon us.”
¹² Therefore because of you
Zion shall be plowed as a field;
Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins,
and the mountain of the house a wooded height.

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

Introduction

We're not going to dig deeply into the exegesis of Micah chapter three tonight, but we'll take to two statements as our jumping-off point.

In verse one Micah says:

Hear, you heads of Jacob
and rulers of the house of Israel!
Is it not for you to know justice?

And in verse nine he says:

⁹ Hear this, you heads of the house of Jacob
and rulers of the house of Israel,
who detest justice
and make crooked all that is straight,

The fatal problem in this chapter is that the leaders of God's people do not know justice, and what they do know of it they detest.

And so one of our concerns should be whether or not we are like them.

Do we know true justice? And the parts of it we do know, do we love and embrace it ... or do we dislike it ... and discard it in favor of a man-made alternative that benefits us personally, instead?

That is the great sin of the leaders here, and lest it be our sin as well, we need to consider what biblical societal justice looks like, and whether we love and pursue that, or whether we tend to trade it for something else.

So tonight I want to consider three things.

First, we will look for an understanding of justice as it is found in God's character. Second, we will consider what it means that the justice found in God's character should be reflected in society. And third, we will begin to consider some of the ways that we, as God's people, are called to pursue the sort of justice that is found in God's character.

Much of what we will cover tonight is again rooted in and draws from Tim Keller's 2020 articles on Biblical justice, though at his suggestion we will also spend a good chunk of time with the Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck as well.

Justice is Found in God's Character

And Bavinck will be our guide as we consider the sort of justice that is found in the character of God.

Bavinck gets into this question in his extensive discussion of the attributes of God. And he describes God's justice (or his "righteousness" in the more narrow biblical sense) as God's "constant and perpetual desire to grant every person his or her due." [226]

And as we look at the Scriptures, two aspects of God's justice especially emerge. There are what Bavinck calls "God's remunerative justice" and God's "retributive justice." [222] And those two words are going to be important, so make sure you catch this. God's "retributive justice" is the justice when he gives the wicked the punishment that they are due. It is often described in the Bible as the wrath of God, that he pours out on the evil. So that is his "retributive justice" (as in "retribution") – when he punishes those who do wrong. [222-223]

The second aspect of God's justice though, is his "remunerative justice" (as in "remuneration"). This is the justice by which he gives good things to those who do good. It is the just rewards that he promises to those who do what is right. It is, as Bavinck puts it: "the attribute by virtue of which God vindicates the righteous and raises them to a position of honor and well-being." That's his "remunerative justice." [223]

Now, when it comes to justice, I think we tend to think of God's retributive justice (his justice that gives punishment), more than we think of his remunerative justice (his justice that gives rewards). But Bavinck writes: "It is noteworthy [...], that God's remunerative justice [his justice in rewarding the good] is far more prominent in Scripture than his retributive justice." [222]

Bavinck is saying that while both aspects of God's justice are clearly in the Scriptures, when the Bible talks about God's justice, its focus is more on how he gives good things to those who do good, than it is on how he gives punishment to those who do bad.

Now ... this can throw us off at first. Because "there is none who does good, not even one" – right? That's what we read in Psalm 14 ... and again in Psalm 53. So how could the Bible speak most prominently of God's justice in terms of him blessing the good?

And the problem gets even sharper as we look at other psalms ... where we can find lines we are given to pray that we feel uncomfortable praying. in Psalm 119[:149] we are told to pray "O LORD, according to your justice give me life." According to your justice? But wouldn't it be that according to God's justice we deserve death?

And it gets worse. In Psalm 7[:8] we pray "Judge me, O LORD, according to my righteousness and according to the integrity that is within me." But I thought we shouldn't want to be judged according to our own righteousness – wouldn't that be bad? And even more distressing, in Psalm 18[:20] we are told to pray with David: "The LORD dealt with me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands he rewarded me."

What is going on here? It feels wrong to pray these words of Scripture which are given to us to pray.

One of my favorite theologians has a helpful saying in these sorts of situations. He says: "Any time our theology makes it difficult or impossible to say what Scripture says, our theology must be mistaken." [Peter Leithart, *The Baptized Body*, 25]

In this case, it's not that our theology is flat-out wrong as much as it is that it is often incomplete.

And the first key thing to understand is that God's justice comes to us in the context of his gracious covenants.

The very concept of justice, Bavinck points out, presupposes a few things. It first presupposes a lawgiver, who establishes the rights of the parties involved. It then presupposes some sort of treaty or contract by which the rights of each party will be respected. And third, it presupposes that the rights of the treaty will be maintained by rewarding those who conform to it, and punishing those who break from it. [226]

Put differently, justice is rooted in a covenant. And that becomes key to understanding God's remunerative justice – the justice by which he rewards people, even though they are fallen.

To begin, at the most basic level, creatures have no rights before God. They can't put him under their obligation, or bring him into their debt. Even so, Bavinck notes, God has given each creature "rights" so to speak." God has given each creature a nature of its own. And that nature is supposed to be respected as God's creational intent. And so woven into the very structure and "nature of all existing beings" God has given rights – he has obligated himself to them. [227] God creates Adam and Eve, and he promises them good things if they continue in faithfulness. This is not because their good deeds put God in their debt in some absolute sense – it is because God, in the Covenant of Life has chosen to put himself under these obligations. The grace of that

first covenant with Adam and Eve means that the good gifts they receive for obedience would be, in some sense, remunerative justice. God is giving them their due within the covenant – the covenant established by his grace.

Of course Adam and Eve rebelled, and they forfeited all the rights they had been granted before God – and all their descendants with them. But even so, God does not stop there. “He makes a ‘covenant of nature’ with Noah and a ‘covenant of grace’ with Abraham, acts by which he again, out of sheer grace, grants to his creatures an array of rights and binds himself to maintain these rights. Thus,” Bavinck continues, “by the grace of God, a complete order of justice was established, in the realm of both nature and grace, an order encompassing an array of ordinances and laws that he himself maintains and makes effective.” [227] And so, the justice of the covenants – whether the covenant of nature or the covenant of grace – the justice of the covenants operates by God’s gracious provision to his fallen creatures.

What does this mean? How does this actually play out?

We might start by thinking of it in the covenant of grace – the covenant of redemption. God has established a set of obligations between himself and his people. As we give him our ultimate loyalty and trust in him, he gives us his favor and salvation. He calls us to live according to his law, but even within the covenant he provides a way for us to deal with our failure to keep his law – with cleansing coming through the sacrificial system in the Old Testament, and through confession in the new. And so, even though in an absolute sense we are sinful and unworthy of God’s blessing, within the covenant of redemption, we can, as the psalmist does, call on God to judge us according to our righteousness, as we seek to keep the terms of the covenant of redemption.

That’s why, Zechariah could be far from perfect, but Luke could still describe him as “righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord.” [Luke 1:6]

And so, while in an absolute sense, even when we do all we can, we remain unworthy servants (as Jesus says in Luke 17:10), at the same time, when we love our enemies, God will reward us according to the covenant (as Jesus says in Luke 6:35).

Within God’s gracious covenant of redemption for all who have trusted in him, there is both remunerative justice when we keep his covenant, and retributive justice if we break his covenant.

And outside the covenant of redemption, God does the same thing in what Bavinck calls the “covenant of nature” – made with Noah. There too, God obligates himself to blessings towards his creation, while also establishing punishments for evil. And this dynamic carries on not just in the specifics mentioned in Genesis 9.

After all, even outside the covenant of redemption, so long as we are in God’s world, fallen though it may be, the laborer is still worthy of his wages and the thief is worthy of his punishment. Though all humanity falls short, in God’s world his remunerative and retributive justice are still to be in place.

With that, we can say, with Bavinck, that there are, in a sense, “rights” written into the fabric of humanity. But their roots and their nature are very different from the secular ones we discussed

last time. Because this concept of rights is rooted in God as its source, and it looks to God's character and revelation for its details. Bavinck, again, puts it like this – he writes: “God is the supreme Lawgiver, and [...] the entire order of justice undergirding every domain of life is rooted in him. All laws and rights, whatever they may be, have their ultimate ground, not in a social contract, nor in self-existent natural law or in history, but in the will of God, viewed [...] as a will of goodness and grace. God's grace is the fountainhead of all laws and rights.” [Bavinck, 227-228]

And God's justice, which is the basis for human and societal justice, is both retributive and remunerative – both the justice that punishes those who do what is evil, and that rewards those who do what is good. [Bavinck, 224]

In all of this, we see that biblical justice – both retributive and remunerative – finds its origin and its basis in the character of God.

The Justice of God's Character Should be Reflected in Society

That then brings us to our second point: that the justice of God's character should be reflected in human society.

The ultimate ground of societal justice, as Bavinck said, is not found “in a social contract, nor in self-existent natural law or in history, but in the will [in the character] of God.” [227-228]

And that kind of justice means that in our societies, those who do good should be rewarded and those who do evil should be punished.

And the apostles affirm this. Peter writes that emperors and governors are put in place by God “to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good.” [2 Peter 2:13-14] The Apostle Paul writes that those in authority in a society are put there by God to give approval to those who do good and to be an avenger of God's wrath on the wrongdoer. [Romans 13:3-4]

Of course such societies and their leaders did not always do what they were supposed to do – that's not our point. Our point is that they knew that's how they were *supposed* to act: to reward those who do good and punish those who do evil.

Neither aspect of justice is automatic – both need to be actively pursued for a society to be just. But what's interesting, as I reflected on this, is that in our culture right now, many of us tend to think that we need to actively pursue one of these aspects of justice as a society, and then we assume that the other one will just sort of fall into place naturally. It's an odd sort of thing.

And so, for those on the left in our culture, there is now a big focus on what we would describe as a form of remunerative justice. The question raised is: are those who do what is good in our society – those who work hard, and play by the rules, and act right, and do what they should – do they really receive the good that they should as a result? Or are opportunities to receive good for their good work being denied them? And so, their focus is often on upward social mobility, and on opportunity and on fair availability of resources for those who will use them responsibly. Now, we may debate the details of how this should be carried out, but we should recognize that

the kind of justice this is seeking to fulfill is remunerative justice: those on the left want us to take intentional action as a society to make sure that everyone who does good and works hard really does get rewarded justly. And they don't take for granted that they will.

But then those on the left tend to want to push aside or even reject retributive justice (the punishment of those who do bad). There is often an assumption that if we worked hard to get remunerative justice right (if there is enough opportunity to be rewarded for doing good), then retributive justice would take care of itself: we'd no longer need to think as much about punishing those who do evil because people would mostly stop doing evil. So the left tends to focus on one aspect of justice while neglecting the other.

And then those on the right often do the opposite. They focus on retributive justice. They want to strengthen our justice system, so that evil actions receive the sort of punishments they deserve. They want to make sure we penalize those who do wrong, and a strong legal structure to carry that out. And we might debate over the details of what should get punishment, and we might have different views on how harsh that punishment should be, but we should recognize that the kind of justice this seeks retributive justice: those on the right want us to take intentional action as a society to make sure that those who do evil are punished and kept from repeating the evil they have done. And they don't take for granted that that will happen unless we are intentional.

But then those on the right tend to want to push aside or even reject the idea of intentional remunerative justice. There is often an assumption that if we worked hard to get retributive justice right (if we had the right penalties in place for wrongdoing), then remunerative justice would take care of itself: we wouldn't need to worry about those who work hard and do good receiving good things in return – it would just sort of happen. So the right also tends to focus on one aspect of justice while neglecting the other.

And then when the two sides line up, they often talk past each other. Each holds primarily on to one aspect of justice, and says we, as a society, need to be intentional about pursuing it. And then each one also seems to naively assume that some sort of natural law – whether the inherent goodness of human nature or the inherent goodness of the market or something else – but some sort of natural law will just take care of the other aspect of justice for us if we take care of the first.

And I'm no expert in all this ... but I think that from a biblical perspective, that's a little naïve on both ends.

We live in a world of sinful people, who often establish sinful systems, all in the midst of a fallen creation. And if left to itself, the world tends to thwart both the retributive justice and the remunerative justice that are found in God's righteous character, and which God calls for in all human societies – both within the covenant of redemption and within the covenant of nature.

And so that is what societal justice is supposed to look like. We are supposed to have societies that “have a constant and perpetual desire to grant each person his or her due” – to be sure that those who do good receive good things, and those who do evil are punished. That is how the justice of God's character is to be reflected in human society. And it takes intentionality.

The Justice of God's Character Should Be Pursued by God's People

And that brings us to our third and final point for this evening. Which is that the justice of God's character should be pursued in human society by God's people.

For this section I will be drawing more from Tim Keller's article on justice in the Bible, as we identify three initial ways that we are to pursue that justice in society: We are to pursue it as individuals, we are to pursue it as a society, and we are to pursue it as individuals within a society.

As Individuals

So first, we are to pursue it as individuals.

When it comes to retributive justice – to punishing those who do wrong – this means some things, but not others. It doesn't mean, on a societal level that we take punishment for crime into our own hands. Paul reminds us that we are not to seek vengeance, but that punishing those who do evil is to be done by those who are in authority. [Romans 12-13]

Sometimes, in a certain sphere – in our family, or our workplace, or the church, or another institution, we will have some role of authority which may call us to respond to those who do wrong, and then we are to seek to imitate the justice of God. But even then, we fulfill that role in a certain office. As individuals, retributive justice is usually not our calling.

But interestingly, as individuals remunerative justice often is our calling. And it takes the form of generosity. Now, this might seem a little strange, because we tend to think of generosity as an act of charity, not an act of justice. But if that's the case, the Bible's framework may be a bit different from ours.

And there's two important Biblical data points in this.

First, the Bible reminds us that we are not the absolute owners of anything we have. All we have is God's and we are merely stewards.

And then second, the Bible repeatedly speaks of giving to those in need as an act of justice, or fairness.

We see it throughout the book of Proverbs, where the just are described as those who give what they have and disadvantage themselves in order to help those in their community.

We see it in the Book of Job, where, in his final defense Job describes living a life of justice [29:14] as including giving to the poor and feeding those in need [31:16-17]

And we see it also in Paul's appeal to the Christians in Corinth, to contribute to a collection for the Christians in Jerusalem. As he appeals to them in 2 Corinthians 8, he says that their abundance should be used to supply for the needs of the Christians in Jerusalem, and Paul says twice, this is a matter of "fairness" as the ESV translates it, or "equality" as the NASB puts it.

The situation is worth reflecting on.

Those in need in Jerusalem are not impoverished because they refuse to work. We know Paul had little patience for that [2 Thess 3:10-12]. But through a series of things outside their control, they were in need. We don't have the full picture, but first, it seems that the church in Jerusalem may have had a number of converts who were widows: these were individuals at a disadvantage because of social structures that made it difficult for them to provide for themselves. Second, it may be that these widows had formerly been taken care of by the Jewish charity structure in Jerusalem, but they were cut off because of their faith in Christ: and so they may have been disadvantaged because of the sinful decisions of others. But third, there also was a famine in Jerusalem: the created order had acted in such a way to put these believers in need.

These believers were not receiving what they needed – they were being deprived of remunerative justice for a whole range of reasons. And while none of it was the Corinthian's fault, equality, fairness, justice called on them to practice radical generosity and to give to them.

Now, Paul did not confiscate their money, and that is important. At the same time, he said that justice demanded generosity.

And the early church followed Paul's lead. Basil the Great, writing in the early church could say: "The bread which you keep belongs to the hungry; the coats in your closet, to the naked, those shoes ... to the shoeless; the gold you have hidden to the needy." After quoting this, Tim Keller comments that since Basil was writing back in the fourth century, you cannot accuse him of being a Marxist. [Quoted in Keller, n.18]

What then, is underlying Basil's statement? What is underlying Paul's?

We might look at it like this: What we have is not our own – it is God's. And we are to use it according to God's character. Which may mean that we are called on, as individuals, to use it through acts of generosity in order to promote remunerative justice in the world. When people are disadvantaged because of their circumstances, especially when they have done good, and they do not receive the remunerative justice they should, and we have the ability to help them receive it, by giving them what has been given to us, then justice may call us to that kind of generosity.

As individuals, remunerative justice may call us to radical generosity.

That's one thing to consider at the level of the individual.

As a Society

A second thing to consider is what this looks like, in broad strokes, at the level of a society.

We might say first that it calls for just retributive justice and just remunerative justice. And by just, we don't always mean bigger. We mean proportional with how God values things.

Sometimes for retributive justice this means greater penalties for evil than an unbelieving culture may call for. But other times it means lesser penalties than an unbelieving world puts in place. Keller points out that in the Code of Hammurabi, if a man of a lower class stole from a man of a higher class, the penalty could be death. The Mosaic Law, on the other hand, “never punishes theft with death, not because theft was not serious, but because the Bible saw every human life as infinitely more valuable than property.” [Keller, n.20]

And so justice seeks to establish in society both penalties for evil and rewards for good that are rightly proportioned, according to a Biblical worldview – according to the character of God.

But then, once those penalties and rewards are established, biblical justice rooted in God’s character seeks that they be applied equally to all – with no favoritism shown.

This again was distinct in the Bible from something like the Code of Hammurabi in the ancient world, which gave different punishments based on class. And so, while a lower-class man could be executed for theft towards an upper-class man, if an upper-class man murdered a lower-class man, he only had to pay a fine.

We might not write such ideas directly into our laws today, but as Keller points out that “Across the cultures and the centuries it has been seen that the less well-off are more likely to be convicted and receive greater penalties for the same crimes those with greater resources commit.” But regardless of class, or race, or gender, or cultural background, or country of origin, this should not be so.

For Biblical justice, each person is to receive what is due to them for the good or the evil they have done, and each person is to be treated with dignity because they bear the image of God, no matter their class, race, or anything else.

And so, retributive justice in society that is rooted in the character of God means that there is supposed to be proportional consequences for evil that is done, and those consequences are to be given equally to all who commit such acts, regardless of their connections, their background, or their other resources.

And remunerative justice in society that is rooted in the character of God means that there is supposed to be proportional rewards for doing right – for doing what is good and for working hard ... and the opportunity for such work and rewards is to be available to all, not given to the privileged and kept from the marginal.

In the most broad strokes, this is what societal justice is supposed to look like.

Yet no society lives up to these realities.

What then, are we to do as individuals who live in societies that fall short of a biblical concept of justice?

As Individuals in a Society

This leads us to our third element: Advocacy.

We are called to advocate for those who are not receiving the justice that they should.

This may take the form of advocating for the victims of evil, by working to see those who victimized them receive retributive justice by the criminal justice system.

But it may also mean – and may more often mean – that we advocate for those who are being denied remunerative justice in their life situation – who should receive good, but are not.

And that sort of advocacy will most often focus on the poor and the marginalized.

Keller writes this – he says: “While we are to treat all equally, and not show partiality to any, we are to have special concern for the poor, the weak, and the powerless. Proverbs 31:8-9 says, “Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves... Defend the rights of the poor and needy.” Is this a contradiction? No. The Bible doesn’t say “Speak up for the rich and powerful.” It does not mean that the powerful are less important as persons before God. They certainly are equally as important. But they don’t *need* you to speak up for them. However, the poor do need you.”

“The call to advocacy,” Keller goes on, “assumes that a fact of our fallen world is a highly uneven distribution of opportunity and resources.” The call to advocacy also assumes that there are some who seek to perpetuate this uneven distribution for their own gain. This is what the Bible calls “oppression.” And it is described in our text in Micah three. Biblical justice requires that we fight these realities of society in a fallen world.

Bavinck puts the same idea like this – he says that in the Bible, “Righteousness [or “justice”] is [...] viewed as the most important task of people and the strongest proof of righteousness for them [is] to protect the oppressed and save the wretched from the injustice and persecution to which they are exposed. This is that in which the righteousness of God consists, and therefore his defense of the rights of the oppressed also had to be the primary task of the judges and kings of the earth.” [Bavinck, 225]

But what if we are not judges and kings of the earth? What are we to do then?

Well, Keller writes: “There are at least three ways to do this, according to the Bible. [First,] there is direct relief to meet material needs (Luke 10:30-35). Here the advocacy is focused on getting a person or family the legal, medical, financial and other resources they need to face a crisis. [Second] there is empowerment: helping a person, family, or community gain self-sufficiency (Deuteronomy 15:13-14). This invests in ways that help the person or family or group come to the place where they have the resources and forms of capital—social, financial, cultural, personal—so that they are no longer in the position of constantly needing advocacy and help from outside. [Third and finally,] advocacy can take on the social structures that disadvantage certain groups.”

Those first two are pretty straightforward. It’s the third that can cause us to pause.

“Taking on social structures” ... is that really our place? Isn’t that getting “political”? And shouldn’t we really just focus on individual acts? After all, changing societal structures might help some people, but it will affect other people in other ways ... people who may not like it, and who have maybe done nothing wrong. Should society really intervene in such situations, or should we stay on the individual level to sort it out?

Put another way, how much of the responsibility for biblical justice – whether retributive or remunerative – how much of that responsibility is individual, and how much of it is corporate (or communal)?

That seems like a pretty important question.

So come back next week, and we’ll consider it then.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

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