“Biblical Justice, Part 5: When?”
Micah 3-4
September 19, 2021
Faith Presbyterian Church – Evening Service
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We return again this evening to our “parenthetical” series on biblical justice, in the middle of our larger series on the Book of Micah. This is our fifth sermon on this topic, which we have paused on, as we seek a better biblical understanding of societal justice and our responsibility in it, so that we can better know how to apply Micah’s words about societal injustice in our own lives.

In our first two sermons on this topic, we based our definition of biblical justice not in the common understandings on offer in our society, rooted in secular humanism, but in the character of God himself, and considered our calling to manifest the two major aspects of God’s justice in our society: his retributive justice by which he renders just punishment to those who do evil, and his remunerative justice by which he provides for those in need and rewards those who do good.

In our third sermon on justice we focused on corporate responsibility for justice – the fact that we are responsible to work for justice not only in our individual lives and actions, but we are also responsible to advocate for justice in the communities and the societies we are a part of.

Then, two weeks ago, in our fourth sermon on justice we discussed how we are to work for justice first in the church and then in the world, and that when it comes to our work in the world, the work for justice primarily falls to the church as an organism more than as an institution – two categories we considered from Abraham Kuyper.

Tonight, we come to the topic of timeframe: When should we expect justice?

Our expectations for a timeframe will significantly affect how we approach this topic, along with what we expect of ourselves, of others, and of society in general.

With that in mind, let’s hear now from our text: Micah 3:1-4:5.

Our sermon is again a topical one, but this text will provide us with the important framework for what we consider tonight. I know you’ve heard it a few times before. But I ask that you once again, please 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.

4:1 It shall come to pass in the latter days
that the mountain of the house of Yahweh
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and it shall be lifted up above the hills;
and peoples shall flow to it,
2 and many nations shall come, and say:
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of Yahweh,
to the house of the God of Jacob,
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths."
For out of Zion shall go forth the law,
and the word of Yahweh from Jerusalem.
3 He shall judge between many peoples,
and shall decide disputes for strong nations far away;
and they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war anymore;
4 but they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree,
and no one shall make them afraid,
for the mouth of Yahweh of hosts has spoken.
5 For all the peoples walk
each in the name of its god,
but we will walk in the name of Yahweh our God
forever and ever.

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

Introduction

So, our topic tonight is one of timeframe. Our question is: When should we expect justice?

What I want to argue tonight, based on our passage from Micah, and on some help from a few theologians, is that as we work for justice in society, and as we consider the timeframe of justice, we are to have a holy patience *and* a holy impatience. And with those things, we are also to reject an unholy form of impatience, and an unholy form of patience.

Let's consider those one at a time.

Embracing Holy Patience, Rejecting Unholy Impatience

First, the gospel calls us to embrace holy patience and hope when it comes to justice. And we see that in our text when we consider the relationship between chapter three and chapter four.

From chapter three to chapter four there is what one commentator calls "a breathtaking shift." ["Waltke, 182] We shift from a severe criticism of the injustice of Micah's day to this picture of justice and righteousness reigning not only in the land itself, but also in the world beyond. And at the hinge of that shift are the words in chapter four verse one which say: "It shall come to pass in the latter days."

"The latter days" in Micah and in Isaiah are, as Ray Ortlund explains, "an expression for the future beyond the horizon." It is often, though not always a reference "specifically to the time of the Messiah," which was decisively inaugurated in Jesus's resurrection, but will come to "complete realization and final fulfillment at the end of the age" when Christ returns. [Ortlund, 1242]

In any case, in Micah, it "refers to some time in the future, down the timeline of history, some distance from the present situation." [Davis, 76]

So … in chapter three, Micah has called the people to repentance for the injustice that reigns in his day, among God's people. Why does he pair that then with this picture of the distant future?

And there are several reasons for this, but one is that in order for God's people to work for justice now with a holy patience and hope, they need to know the end of the story. Because knowing the rest of the story changes how our hearts interact with the part of the story we find ourselves in right now.

My mom likes watching professional tennis. And she is especially a fan of Rafael Nadal. She follows him in all the major tournaments and loves watching his matches. We were talking about this the other day, and she told me a funny thing that she does.

She said that when Nadal has a particularly difficult match coming up, rather than watching the match live, she will usually record it, then, when it's over, she'll look up online what the final outcome was. And if Nadal has won, then she'll watch the recording of the match.

She explained essentially that that lets her watch the match with excitement and anticipation, but without anxiety or fear. There is still excitement and suspense. She doesn't know *how* he's going to win. She doesn't know how each set will play out. She doesn't know who will win each game or what will happen with the next point. She doesn't know what's going to happen next, but she does know the final outcome. She knows he will win. And that gives her a peace and a patience with the match, even when things look bad for Nadal. The excitement and suspense are not in whether or not he will win, but in the question of *how* he will win.

And it struck me that that is a bit of picture of what Micah is doing here for Israel … and of what Christ has done for us.

Micah, in chapter four, gives Israel a glimpse of the end of the story. And, of course, Christ has given us even more. For we have the full knowledge of Christ's first coming and the promise of his return. We know that at the end of history Christ will come back and make all things new, and he will bring perfect justice to human life, and we will live with him forever, and things will be the way they are supposed to be.

And that knowledge should cultivate in us a peace – a holy patience and a confident hope. We don't trust in ourselves to bring about perfect justice. We also don't expect it to come right away. We don't know what the next day or week or year or decade or century will bring, but we do know the final outcome – we know the end of the story, and as we trust God's promises we can have a holy patience and a confident hope. Tim Keller writes that knowing that perfect justice is dependent on the work of Christ, and knowing of Christ's future return, helps us, as we work for justice, to "maintain a quiet confidence in the midst of the chaos" around us, and it helps us reject the temptation to self-righteousness about our own role, the temptation to anger and hate when others seem to stand in our way, and the temptation to despondency and hopelessness when justice does not come as fast as we desire it to. [Keller, "Justice in the Bible"]

So we see that the gospel calls us to embrace holy patience and confident hope when it comes to justice, and to reject an unholy impatience.

Embracing Holy Impatience, Rejecting Unholy Patience

But the Bible doesn't stop there … though we can often be tempted to.

Because there is also an unholy, false form of patience … and corresponding to that, there is a holy, righteous impatience that we are called to have towards injustice.

And I was struck by an aspect of this as I was reading the Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck recently.

In the *Prolegomena* of his *Reformed Dogmatics* Herman Bavinck is discussing the basis of true theological knowledge … but as he does, he begins to discuss how we view the Church in relation to such knowledge, and then he steps further back, and reflects on what he calls a "'law' we see at work in every area of life" – and particularly he seems to mean in every area of social life.

What is that law? He explains: “On the one hand, there is a revolutionary spirit that seeks to level all that has taken shape historically in order to start rebuilding things from the ground up.”

That sounds a lot like the unholy impatience we’ve already spoken about, right? At least they overlap. That is the approach that thinks we can get perfect justice *now.* It’s the view that either thinks we can force it through society as it is, or that thinks we can just tear down what is, and that *we*, if we were given the levers of power, could build the perfectly just society. This is a delusion. And it’s not only a delusion because we cannot usually achieve the level of power we desire, but it is a delusion especially because in it we overestimate our own moral capabilities. Sin and injustice aren’t just out there in society. They run through our own hearts. And so *we* cannot make things perfect. We are each, every one of us, blind to so much. It is not for us to bring perfect justice, and so we must have a holy patience as we wait ultimately for Christ, at his return, to bring that perfect justice.

But Bavinck isn’t done. There’s not just the revolutionary spirit present in society and human life, he says, but he writes, “There is, however, also a false conservatism that takes pleasure in leaving the existing situation untouched simply because it exists and – in accordance with Calvin’s familiar saying – not to attempt to change a well-positioned evil.” [Bavinck, 1.81]

“A false conservatism that takes pleasure in leaving the existing situation untouched simply because it exists and – in accordance with Calvin’s familiar saying – not to attempt to change a well-positioned evil.”

To get at Bavinck’s point, we can imagine his words being applied to the situation Micah faced in Israel. Think about some of Micah’s contemporaries looking at the situation described in Israel, in chapter three. And imagine the oppressed – the victims described in verses two and three, who are described metaphorically of being butchered and boiled and eaten for the pleasure of those in power over them, while their oppressors enrich themselves.

As they cry for justice, we can imagine someone saying to them “Look … the situation is bad for you, I know. But what can we do? The heads of Jacob, the rulers of Israel, the self-serving priests, and prophets … they are all well established. And we need them. They do a lot of good as well. We live in an imperfect world. One day – in the latter days – everything will be right. But for now … you just need to accept your lot and try to persevere through it.”

Is that Micah’s message in chapters three and four? Is his point in chapter four that nothing he described in chapter three needs to be changed, and everyone should just wait until “the latter days” described in chapter four?

Well, of course not! The words of chapters three and four are meant to call Israel to repentance. It is meant to call oppressors to repentance, yes, but also, it is a call to all within Israel who have the power to bring about change in Israel. If they take chapter three to heart, they should seek to bring about change, and to see justice restored in Israel, because in verse twelve, God has said he will bring judgment on the society as a whole for this sin – not just on the individuals primarily responsible for committing it. Those who allowed it will also suffer in the judgment.

Anyone who reads chapters three and four and concludes that it is best "not to attempt to change a well-positioned evil" has missed the point of Micah entirely.

And yet … we ourselves can be tempted to leave … and even defend leaving … a "well-positioned evil" in place in the world around us. Can't we?

I was struck by the phrase Bavinck attributes to Calvin there, and so I wanted to find its source.

James Swan has tracked the phrase down and argues that it is drawn from Calvin's work titled *The Necessity of Reforming the Church.*

There, Calvin speaks about those who agree with many of the critiques that the Reformers brought to the Church, but who, at the same time, urged them not to take such drastic action as trying to directly reform it. Such reform was unlikely to succeed, they said, and so, Calvin notes, "they hence concluded that the best course is not to meddle with an evil well fixed."

But such people, Calvin says, misunderstand that the real basis of any change for the good is not the power of men but the work of God. "Therefore," he writes, "we are not to wait for facility of action, either from the will of men, or the temper of the times, but must rush forward through the midst of despair. It is the will of our Master that his gospel be preached. Let us obey his command, and follow whithersoever he calls. What the success will be it is not ours to inquire. Our only duty is to wish for what is best, and beseech it of the Lord in prayer; to strive with all zeal, solicitude, and diligence, to bring about the desired result, and, at the same time, to submit with patience to whatever that result may be." [Calvin, 110]

Calvin here, urges both patience and rushing forward into action. He urges holy patience, but he derides unholy false patience, that becomes comfortable with evil, that is willing to tolerate it, and that is only willing to work against it when such work seems guaranteed to succeed and not cost us much personally. This is the sort of "false conservativism" Bavinck critiques. Calvin describes it as it operated in the Church of his time, but Bavinck's point is that the same dynamic exists throughout history, and in every area of life.

The question for us to consider is, where do we adopt this kind of false conservativism towards justice in our society? Where do we tend to have this sort of unholy false patience that makes peace with injustice that is done to others?

God's justice calls us to a holy impatience in seeking and working for justice for others – even when we don't know what the outcome of our efforts will be, as Calvin highlights, still we are to work for the will of God in all things.

That is our calling.

Christians have reflected on that calling at many times and in many ways throughout history. And one powerful articulation of that calling is found in Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from a Birmingham Jail."

I want to read several long portions of Dr. King's letter. And I want to be clear on why I'm

reading this and why I'm not, by heading off two concerns or objections right away.

First, for our purposes tonight, I am interested in the words and the perspective King gives us here. Over the years several concerns about King's personal conduct have been raised, and those issues are worthy of discussion. But that's not our focus tonight. Whatever conclusions may be drawn on those issues, as valuable as that may be, does not do away with the question of whether his words before us tonight are correct and true.

Our concern is: Does he identify the pattern we are talking about tonight, and does he rightly identify it in a large portion of the American church of his day? That is what we are looking for in his words, and so that should be our focus. Don't let yourself off the hook tonight by shifting attention from the words and the pattern to the man – by shifting the attention from you to him.

Second, I'm not reading this tonight to gloss over the distance between our situation and King's, but to point to an underlying pattern in an example from our country and from Christians who, in many ways, were not that different from us.

It can be easy to take the distance between race relations in Birmingham in 1963, and race relations in Tacoma in 2021 – it can be easy to look at that distance, and push King's words aside as not applying to us.

But I'm not disputing the distance. I'm not drawing so crude and direct a line. And I'm not at all intending to limit our considerations about justice to the topic of race. I want to make a deeper point, and a point which I don't think lets any of us off the hook.

What prompted King to write this letter from his jail cell, after being arrested for participating in non-violent demonstrations, was an open letter published in the newspaper by eight white Alabama clergy, criticizing King's methods, and urging African Americans to patience, without demonstrations or direct action to bring racial justice about.

What King considers in his letter are not whites who disagree with his goals … but white moderates and white Christians of his day who do not dispute his goals, but who, at the same time, were effectively arguing, to use Calvin's words, that it is best "not to attempt to change a well-positioned evil."

And that is what King addresses.

And I think we all face that temptation. When injustice (whatever form it may take) doesn't seem to affect us personally, we urge others to quiet down, and be patient, and not be so ambitious as to try to change "a well-positioned evil." We urge what I would call an unholy form of false patience, rooted in a self-centered sort of peace we feel towards the suffering of others.

But Calvin will not let that slide. Neither will Bavinck. And neither will King.

King here addresses it when it comes to race. Maybe the issue where you tend towards unholy patience with injustice suffered by others isn't race. Maybe it's class. Maybe it's poverty. Maybe it's abortion. Maybe it's something else. Or maybe it is race!

While you listen to the words of Dr. King, I want you to ask yourself: this pattern King describes in white moderates and white Christians of his day – where do I see that pattern in my own life and heart? Not where do I see it in others (that is easy), but where do I see it in me? Where am I comfortable with injustice because it doesn't affect me? Where do I urge an unholy false patience towards the suffering of others? Where do I tend to think that it's better not to challenge a well-positioned evil in the world around me?

With those questions in mind, hear the following extended excerpts from Rev. Dr. King.

He begins by explaining that he is working in Birmingham because there is injustice there. He writes to the clergymen who wrote that open letter, saying "You deplore the demonstrations taking place in Birmingham. But your statement, I am sorry to say, fails to express a similar concern for the conditions that brought about the demonstrations."

He continues:

"Birmingham is probably the most thoroughly segregated city in the United States. Its ugly record of brutality is widely known. Negroes have experienced grossly unjust treatment in the courts. There have been more unsolved bombings of Negro homes and churches in Birmingham than in any other city in the nation. These are the hard, brutal facts of the case. On the basis of these conditions, Negro leaders sought to negotiate with the city fathers. But the latter consistently refused to engage in good faith negotiation."

[…]

"You may well ask: 'Why direct action? Why sit ins, marches and so forth? Isn't negotiation a better path?' You are quite right in calling for negotiation. Indeed, this is the very purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored.

[…]

"My friends, I must say to you that we have not made a single gain in civil rights without determined legal and nonviolent pressure. Lamentably, it is an historical fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily. Individuals may see the moral light and voluntarily give up their unjust posture; but, as Reinhold Niebuhr has reminded us, groups tend to be more immoral than individuals.

[…]

"Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct action campaign that was 'well timed' in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word 'Wait!' It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This 'Wait' has almost always meant 'Never.' We must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists, that 'justice too long delayed is justice denied.'

"We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God given rights. […] Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, 'Wait.' But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate filled policemen curse, kick and even kill your black brothers and sisters; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six

year old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky, and see her beginning to distort her personality by developing an unconscious bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five year old son who is asking: 'Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?'; when you take a cross county drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; […] when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next, and are plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of 'nobodiness'--then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait."

A bit later he writes this – he says:

"I must make two honest confessions to you, my Christian and Jewish brothers. First, I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: 'I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action'; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a 'more convenient season.' Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.

[…]

"I had also hoped that the white moderate would reject the myth concerning time in relation to the struggle for freedom. I have just received a letter from a white brother in Texas. He writes: 'All Christians know that the colored people will receive equal rights eventually, but it is possible that you are in too great a religious hurry. It has taken Christianity almost two thousand years to accomplish what it has. The teachings of Christ take time to come to earth.' Such an attitude stems from a tragic misconception of time, from the strangely irrational notion that there is something in the very flow of time that will inevitably cure all ills. Actually, time itself is neutral; it can be used either destructively or constructively. More and more I feel that the people of ill will have used time much more effectively than have the people of good will. We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people. Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men willing to be coworkers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively, in the knowledge that the time is always ripe to do right. Now is the time to make real the promise of democracy and transform our pending national elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood. Now is the time to lift our national policy from the quicksand of racial injustice to the solid rock of human dignity."

King discusses his approach of nonviolent direct action, contrasted with violence on one side, and what he calls "do nothingism" on the other side. But then he notes that now, his nonviolent

approach has been labeled as “extremist” by some. To which he responds that it seems to him that what is needed now are more extremists for the love of others, after the pattern of the Old Testament prophets, and the Apostle Paul, and Martin Luther, and John Bunyan and others.

From there, he goes on – he writes:

“I had hoped that the white moderate would see this need. Perhaps I was too optimistic; perhaps I expected too much. I suppose I should have realized that few members of the oppressor race can understand the deep groans and passionate yearnings of the oppressed race, and still fewer have the vision to see that injustice must be rooted out by strong, persistent, and determined action. I am thankful, however, that some of our white brothers in the South have grasped the meaning of this social revolution and committed themselves to it. They are still all too few in quantity, but they are big in quality.”

After praising specific white men and women who had worked and suffered for the cause of racial justice, King continues with a longer reflection on the white church. This is another long passage, but the last I will read from tonight. King writes:

“Let me take note of my other major disappointment. I have been so greatly disappointed with the white church and its leadership. Of course, there are some notable exceptions. […]

“But despite these notable exceptions, I must honestly reiterate that I have been disappointed with the church. I do not say this as one of those negative critics who can always find something wrong with the church. I say this as a minister of the gospel, who loves the church; who was nurtured in its bosom; who has been sustained by its spiritual blessings and who will remain true to it as long as the cord of life shall lengthen.

“When I was suddenly catapulted into the leadership of the bus protest in Montgomery, Alabama, a few years ago, I felt we would be supported by the white church. I felt that the white ministers, priests, and rabbis of the South would be among our strongest allies. Instead, some have been outright opponents, refusing to understand the freedom movement and misrepresenting its leaders; all too many others have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained glass windows.

“In spite of my shattered dreams, I came to Birmingham with the hope that the white religious leadership of this community would see the justice of our cause and, with deep moral concern, would serve as the channel through which our just grievances could reach the power structure. I had hoped that each of you would understand. But again I have been disappointed.

“I have heard numerous southern religious leaders admonish their worshipers to comply with a desegregation decision because it is the law, but I have longed to hear white ministers declare: ‘Follow this decree because integration is morally right and because the Negro is your brother.’ In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro, I have watched white churchmen stand on the sideline and mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities. In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard many ministers say: ‘Those are social issues, with which the gospel has no real concern.’ And I have watched many churches commit themselves to a completely other worldly religion which makes a strange, un-Biblical distinction between body and soul, between the sacred and the secular.

“I have traveled the length and breadth of Alabama, Mississippi and all the other southern states. On sweltering summer days and crisp autumn mornings I have looked at the South's beautiful churches with their lofty spires pointing heavenward. I have beheld the impressive outlines of her massive religious education buildings. Over and over I have found myself asking:

‘What kind of people worship here? Who is their God? […] Where were they when Governor Wallace gave a clarion call for defiance and hatred? Where were their voices of support when bruised and weary Negro men and women decided to rise from the dark dungeons of complacency to the bright hills of creative protest?’

“Yes, these questions are still in my mind. In deep disappointment I have wept over the laxity of the church. But be assured that my tears have been tears of love. There can be no deep disappointment where there is not deep love. Yes, I love the church. How could I do otherwise? I am in the rather unique position of being the son, the grandson, and the great grandson of preachers. Yes, I see the church as the body of Christ. But, oh! How we have blemished and scarred that body through social neglect and through fear of being nonconformists.

“There was a time when the church was very powerful--in the time when the early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society. Whenever the early Christians entered a town, the people in power became disturbed and immediately sought to convict the Christians for being ‘disturbers of the peace’ and ‘outside agitators.’ But the Christians pressed on, in the conviction that they were ‘a colony of heaven,’ called to obey God rather than man. Small in number, they were big in commitment. They were too God-intoxicated to be ‘astronomically intimidated.’ By their effort and example they brought an end to such ancient evils as infanticide and gladiatorial contests. Things are different now. So often the contemporary church is a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. So often it is an archdefender of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's silent--and often even vocal--sanction of things as they are.

“But the judgment of God is upon the church as never before. If today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century. Every day I meet young people whose disappointment with the church has turned into outright disgust.

“Perhaps I have once again been too optimistic. Is organized religion too inextricably bound to the status quo to save our nation and the world? Perhaps I must turn my faith to the inner spiritual church, the church within the church, as the true ekklesia and the hope of the world. But again I am thankful to God that some noble souls from the ranks of organized religion have broken loose from the paralyzing chains of conformity and joined us as active partners in the struggle for freedom. They have left their secure congregations and walked the streets of Albany, Georgia, with us. They have gone down the highways of the South on tortuous rides for freedom. Yes, they have gone to jail with us. Some have been dismissed from their churches, have lost the support of their bishops and fellow ministers. But they have acted in the faith that right defeated is stronger than evil triumphant. Their witness has been the spiritual salt that has preserved the true meaning of the gospel in these troubled times. They have carved a tunnel of hope through the dark mountain of disappointment. I hope the church as a whole will meet the challenge of this decisive hour.”

King’s words should be considered in their context, and we should ask ourselves what the state of things was in the white church in America that made this dynamic that King describes possible.

The history matters. But we should not leave King’s words locked up in American history, just as

we should not leave Micah's words locked up in Israelite history. We should ask: "Where do I see this tendency in myself – not in other people – but in myself? Around what issues, and concerning what kinds of people am I like this? Where do I agree with the idea of justice, but have great patience about the idea of others suffering injustice, so long as I am comfortable?"

Where do you see that sort of unholy false patience in your life?

Conclusion

The promise of the "latter days" – the promise of Christ's return – should enable us to face injustice in this world with a holy patience – with a patient hope that knows that though we may not see the progress we would like, though we may see discouragement in the here and now, we need not panic, because we know the final outcome – we know that Christ, in the end, will make all things new, and God's justice will be victorious in the world. And that, as Keller put it, should help us "maintain a quiet confidence in the midst of the chaos" of this world.

But it should not lull us into complacency. It should not lull us into indifference towards the suffering of others. If anything, it should motivate us to act – out of a desire to see God's justice and character more and more expressed in the world around us, and in the treatment of others. It should lead us to work for change, and for justice, not only in the areas of society that affect us personally, but anywhere injustice is found.

And the presence of this holy patience and this holy impatience should drive us both to pray and to work to see God's kingdom come, and his will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

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