

**“Biblical Justice, Part 8:
Keeping a Christian Perspective
on Actions, Change, and Witness”
Micah 6:8, James 1:27, James 2:15-16
October 10, 2021
Faith Presbyterian Church – Evening Service
Pastor Nicoletti**

We come tonight to the eighth and final sermon of what was supposed to be our two-sermon series on Biblical justice.

Drawing from the work of several theologians we have developed a theology of justice from the Bible in our first five sermons, and in these last three sermons we have focused on how we live out what that vision of societal justice calls us to, without losing our way.

Tonight, we come to our final sermon in this parenthetical series, and after tonight we will continue to progress through the book of Micah, chapter by chapter.

So, tonight as we conclude our topical series on biblical justice, we are focused on keeping a Christian perspective on actions, change, and witness.

With that said, we hear from God’s word, from the book of Micah and the letter of James.

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

First, from Micah 6:8:
He has told you, O man, what is good;
and what does Yahweh require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?

Then, from James 1:27:
Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

And finally, from James 2:15-16:
If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?

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

Introduction

Tonight, as we conclude our series on a biblical approach to societal justice, I want to consider how we think about actions, change, and witness.

What should our actions look like? What should our approach to change look like? How should we expect to provide a witness?

In other words, how do we *do* justice?

Now, as I ask that question, I should remind us of the broad understanding of the word “justice” we are using. Justice, we have said, rooted in the character of God, is both retributive and remunerative: it is both concerned with the punishment due to the wicked on the one hand, as well as the blessings due to the good and the provisions due to the needy, on the other hand. I won’t restate all of this now (if you’re just joining us then you can find a much more detailed explanation of this in the earlier sermons in this series on the website), but in the Bible justice includes the gleaning laws of the Old Testament which provide for the immediate needs of the poor, and the laws of Jubilee that provide for the long-term needs of the poor, by lifting them out of generational poverty, and more. Tonight, as we think about doing justice, we are especially thinking about our role, as Christians, in remunerative justice in society: in caring for those in need, and seeing that those who do good are blessed.

And so, with that in mind, we come back to the question: How do we *do* justice?

And here, I want to argue, that as we start out, we should begin by pursuing deeds over declarations, courage over critique, the particular over the panoramic, and sacrifice over self-assertion.

Now, as I say that, one might respond by saying: wait a minute: “Are you saying that declarations, and critique, and big-picture panoramic perspectives, and self-assertion are all wrong? Because there’s a lot of problems with dismissing those things, not least of them being that you (meaning *me*) have just spent eight sermons, forty thousand words, making big-picture panoramic declarations about biblical justice, critiquing other, secular, perspectives on justice, and asserting that we should listen to you.”

And that’s fair. And I’d respond in two ways. First of all, in many ways this clarifies my point. Because it highlights the obvious fact that while I have been up here for eight sermons *talking about* justice, that does not mean in any way that I have been *doing* justice in these sermons. I have not been. I’ve been talking about it.

Second, I am not saying that we should do one thing, and never do the other. I’m saying that especially if we are just starting out, we must value one of those things over the other. There is a place for declarations about societal justice. But as we start out, we should probably begin with establishing some deeds of justice in our lives first. And we could continue down the list in the same way.

We might put it like this. If you want to train to be a marathon runner, you’re going to need to

jog a lot, and you're going to need to eat a lot of carbohydrates. And if you look like me, then when you first start out, you should pursue jogging over carbo-loading to begin. And as you get the jogging down more and more, there will be more and more of a place and even a need for you to focus on eating carbohydrates. But the prioritization of those things matters, especially as you begin.

Otherwise, if being good at eating carbs makes you a marathon runner, then the medal goes to me, folks.

Now ... the reality is that for many of us in the Reformed world – not for all, but for many – we can be a bit like the overweight guy with a big bowl of pasta, thinking that his intake of carbohydrates makes him a marathon runner.

Because we are good at formulating declarations, or critiquing other people's approaches, or engaging in big-picture panoramic discussions of justice, or asserting ourselves in a debate, and we look at all those things we are saying, and we start to think that we are doing justice. But we are not. We're just talking. We're just eating a lot of pasta.

And brothers and sisters, I say that as someone who is especially prone to making those kinds of mistakes. I get lost in my mind on these kinds of issues. And I often fail to act in concrete ways. So I'm talking about myself tonight. And maybe a few of you share some of my deficiencies. And, if that's the case, then my out-loud self-examination this evening might be a help to you.

And so tonight, I want to consider each of these elements, and to briefly think about what it looks like to pursue one over the other. And as we do that, I want to draw from the life of Francis of Assisi.

I've spoken about Francis before. And his feast day was just this past Monday. And from my limited knowledge, at least, I don't know a Christian figure who better exemplifies commitment to courageous and sacrificial deeds focused on the particular.

So with that, let's dive in to these four dimensions of Christian action, change, and witness.

Deeds Over Declarations

First, if we want to seek to do justice, especially as we start out, we should pursue deeds over declarations.

We live in a culture where everyone likes to make declarations. Everyone likes to make public statements of their views, or announce their support of a cause, or their concern for a group. People often talk about a "national conversation" we are all participating in, but it more often looks like a lot of people just declaring things at others. We like to say stuff. We like telling others what we think.

But many of us are much less excited about actually *doing* something ... about showing up somewhere, and working on something, and serving in some concrete way.

And yet we serve a God who, at his core, is a God who shows up, and serves.

It is one of the things that sets Christianity apart. Muslims assert that God has given them a book. But Christians claim that God showed up himself, in the flesh, in order to serve us. That is the God we follow. He's a God who shows up, and works on what is broken.

Yes, he is a God who has spoken too – we too have a book. We have just heard from his word, and we depend on his word, but his word would do us very little good if he had not shown up and done the work of saving us. In fact, it is only because of what he has done that his words are any help to us, and without his deeds, his words would be of no help to us. After all, the gospel is good news of what God has *done*. If he has not done anything, there can be no good news to write or to preach.

That is what Jesus has done. And we are called to follow him. But for many of us, when we address the needs of others, and injustice in society, and the plight of the marginalized, we often act a lot more like Allah than Christ ... don't we? We send mere words, rather than showing up. Whether those words are simple well-wishes, or whether they are policy debates, whether they are words spoken to others or posted on social media, we often respond to injustice with words rather than deeds. And when we do that, we fail to imitate our Lord.

Francis, on the other hand, was known for his deeds. And just in thinking about Francis's role in history this point becomes hard to deny.

As one biographer notes, along with Martin Luther, Francis is sometimes identified as one of the most influential religious figures in the last thousand years. [Cunningham, vi] He is often credited with breathing new life, revival, and reform into a medieval church that was struggling with coldness, worldliness, and heresy.

And how did he do that? What is he known for?

Francis is and was known for his deeds. He was a preacher as well, that is sure. But what was preserved of him and what spread across the medieval world was not transcripts of his sermons – it was the stories of his deeds.

Even now, if you ask people if they know anything written by Francis, of the three most popular answers you'll probably get, only one of them is actually even from Francis.

The canticle on which our hymn "All Creatures of Our God and King" is from Francis. The well-known "Prayer of St. Francis" that starts out "Lord make me an instrument of your peace," while it may sum up the spirit of Francis, those are not his words – the earliest edition of that prayer is from 1912 – about 700 years late for Francis to have written it.

The other quote some know, about preaching at all times, but doing it without words is also not found among Francis's actual writings. He wrote instead about preaching with *both* word and deed.

Words were important for Francis – as we said, he was a very effective preacher, and he was a poet. But it was his deeds that changed medieval Europe. It was his deeds that renewed and revived the Church. It was his deeds that brought justice to the marginalized

Francis did not begin by going around making declarations about lepers, and how they were neglected and mistreated by society – though they were. He began to serve them in deed. He embraced them. He gave to them. He began helping them. He began by working, not decreeing.

Again, there is a place for words. [Keller, “Justice in the Bible”]. And perhaps the best way to think of it is how Francis put it in his earlier rule, which is where he says that the brothers are to preach *both* by their words and by their deeds. [Francis, *The Earlier Rule*, XVII.1-4]

When we do good deeds, we should let it be known that we are Christians, for that is how, as Jesus puts it, to let our “light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” (Matthew 5:16) But it is the works that lead them to glorify God – it is when we preach not only by our words, but also by our deeds.

That’s the first thing for us to consider – pursuing deeds over declarations when we want to do justice.

Courage Over Critique

Second, if we want to seek to do justice, especially as we start out, we should pursue courage over critique.

What do I mean by that?

Well, I guess I mean to highlight another aspect of our first point about deeds and declarations. Doing something is always risky. Doing something means the possibility of failure. Doing something means you might get it wrong. Doing something takes courage.

Critiquing others is much easier. And often it takes no courage at all. You can take aim at someone else who is doing something, and since you’re not really doing anything – you’re not taking the same risk – there’s no real target on you – there’s nothing to critique. Critiquing others is much easier than the courage it takes to actually go out and try to do something.

We are called to courageous action. But we are often drawn to critiquing others instead.

We are considering this in the realm of remunerative societal justice – helping those in need in both short-term and long-term ways. But this same split between courageous action and mere critique exists in other realms as well.

Dwight Moody was a nineteenth-century evangelist. There is a quote that floats around about him. I’m not sure of its original source, but it’s one of those quotes that rings true even if he never said it.

As an evangelist Moody often faced criticism from others who took issue with some aspect of his theology or his methodology in evangelism. On one occasion it is reported that Moody responded to a critic like this – he said: “It is clear that you don’t like my way of doing evangelism. You raise some good points. Frankly, I sometimes do not like my way of doing evangelism. But I like my way of doing it better than your way of not doing it.”

The same can be said about working for justice. There can be plenty to critique about how other people pursue justice in our society. But often their way of doing it is still better than our way of not doing it.

And once again, the same was true in the life of Francis. He had many opportunities to critique. But instead, he usually chose courageous action.

In Francis’s day, there were real problems with corruption and compromise among the clergy and church leadership. Some people who saw this responded by simply attacking, mocking, and criticizing the disappointing ministers. Francis, on the other hand, simply sought to live the Christian ideal before others as he thought best. Simply giving a critique would not have been difficult. But Francis seems to have recognized that living out a different pattern might be an even better corrective, rather than just calling on others to do that. So he tried to live a life of faithfulness, and service, and humility.

That took courage. Because it opened Francis up to criticism and mockery. It opened Francis up to the possibility that he too might fail to live up to his ideals. It was a risk, and it took much more courage than it would have taken to simply point out the flaws in how others were doing ministry. But Francis did the hard thing. He valued courageous faith over critique of others, and the result was that his life brought much more reform than any essay on the unfaithful priests could have. Francis brought many ministers to repentance and reform, not by hammering them with criticism, but by showing them a better, more faithful, more beautiful way, which by its very existence exposed the shallowness of their own Christian life, and also attracted them to follow in his footsteps.

It can be tempting for us to choose critiquing others over doing things ourselves. But also, it can be tempting for us to choose to listen to and follow people who just critique others, rather than courageously doing anything. The internet is filled with those who have gained a great following not by doing anything, not even really by proactively teaching or presenting anything, but they have simply gained a following by critiquing others: critiquing the actions, and words, and theology, and approach to justice taken by others. By critiquing others they can sound wise and courageous. But often they are not. Critiquing takes much less than actually doing does. And it’s much safer.

In a well-known quote Theodore Roosevelt addressed this tendency, contrasting the critic or commentator with the man who actually gets in the arena and tries to do something. He says this – he says: “It is not the critic who counts: not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles or where the doer of deeds could have done better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly, who errs and comes up short again and again, because there is no effort without error or shortcoming, but who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, who spends himself in a

worthy cause; who, at the best, knows, in the end, the triumph of high achievement, and who, at the worst, if he fails, at least he fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who knew neither victory nor defeat.”

As we seek to do justice, we should pursue courage over critique.

The Particular Over the Panoramic

Third, if we want to seek to do justice, especially as we start out, we should pursue the particular over the panoramic.

When it comes to areas of improving society and working for justice, we have a tendency to gravitate to the big-picture panoramic level. This means that we tend towards focusing on politics over charity organizations, we tend to focus on the national level over the local level, and we tend to focus on idealistic systems to address many things over practical steps to address specific things.

Now, again, there is a place for politics, for national concerns, and for idealistic systems. But most of us will have very little real impact on those levels. On the other hand, if we focus on particular problems, at a local level, through organizations we can be a real part of, we can often do good – we can often help bring a bit more justice in the life of someone else.

Now, a statement like that is not a moral law. But it's also not a statement that is made independent of our theology. One of the striking things about our faith is what some call the “scandal of the particular.” While the pagan philosophers were looking for truth and morality in general, panoramic concepts, the Christians claimed that God spoke truth and showed the moral pattern of life by coming as a particular man, in a particular culture, in a particular time and place. This was a scandal in the ancient world, and it still is today – Richard Dawkins mocks the idea that the God who made the cosmos would show up in a small village in Palestine in the first century, to bring about his great work of redeeming all of creation. But we confess that that's exactly what God did. To change the world, our God entered into the particular.

And more often than not, that is how God has continued to work. While our history books may note the big moments on a big scale, the main way the kingdom of God has moved forward, humanly speaking, is when God's people have embraced the particulars around them, rather than aspiring to operate at the level of the panoramic. God often works by embracing the particular.

And so there is wisdom in considering that, as we approach justice.

And so as important as politics are, we should be asking what other organizations there are that may have less prestige and power, but which we can maybe effect more change in a particular area.

It also may mean embracing local needs. Keller discusses this suggestion (and it is a suggestion, not a piece of theology or an ethical law). He writes:

“I suggest ([though] not binding your consciences!) that Christians work more locally than

nationally on justice matters. It is also better to focus on particular issues of injustice rather than entering heavily into general ‘national conversations’ about it. In many places in the western world our national political institutions are no longer functioning. They are too polarized to forge laws through compromises that involve the greatest number of people and constituencies. This has been their work for centuries, but today they have become ‘platforms’ for individual leaders to speak to their base and press their agendas rather than cooperate with others. National-level politics is largely broken, and entering into ‘national conversations’ through social media tends to simply virtue-signal rather than accomplish anything. By contrast, there are many specific issues that can be worked on [...] locally. Locally, people are more willing to cooperate across lines for specific ends.” [Keller, “Justice in the Bible”]

And as we think about local needs, embracing the particular may also mean zeroing in on a specific issue we will dedicate ourselves to, rather than pursuing some idealistic system that we hope will fix everything.

It can be interesting to talk about what big re-organizations of society would fix a whole number of problems. But most of us won’t be called on to re-organize society any time soon. And most of us will never have the time or energy to address the panorama of needs out there. Which can often discourage us into doing nothing.

Instead of doing nothing, though, we can pick something – some specific need, a justice issue that we will focus on. Focusing on one thing is not saying that other issues are not important – they usually are. But with our limited time and resources, we must also limit our focus as individuals, and rely on the broader Body of Christ to address other issues.

Francis, once more, was a model of this. Francis didn’t set out to start a big religious order, much less a church-wide movement. Francis was ruthlessly practical and particular. He began with such immediate needs. A church building was in ruins. He started to rebuild it with his own hands. After he restored one building, then he went on to a second, and then a third.

Francis did not try to come up with a charity program to help all the lepers of Europe. He began by embracing just one – one leper he encountered on the road, giving him the money he had on him. Then he moved to a particular hospice for lepers near Assisi, and he served those particular people who happened to live there. Even as the order grew, Francis was always concerned to keep them focused on particular needs of particular people.

G.K. Chesterton puts it like this – he says that “Francis did not love humanity but men” [Chesterton, 7]

Later on, Chesterton writes:

“We talk about a man who cannot see the [forest] for the trees. St. Francis was a man who did not want to see the [forest] for the trees. He wanted to see each tree as a separate and almost sacred thing.

[...]

“I have said that St. Francis deliberately did not see the [forest] for the trees. It is even more true that he deliberately did not see the mob for the men. [...] [In a crowd,] he never saw before him a many-headed beast. He only saw the image of God multiplied but never monotonous. To

him a man was always a man and did not disappear in a dense crowd any more than in a desert. He honoured all men; that is, he not only loved but respected them all. What gave him his extraordinary personal power was this; that from the Pope to the beggar, from the sultan of Syria in his pavilion to the ragged robbers crawling out of the wood, there was never a man who looked into those brown burning eyes without being certain that Francis Bernardone was really interested in him; in his own inner individual life from the cradle to the grave.” [Chesterton, 79, 88]

Francis brought justice to so many, and change to society, because he focused on the particular before him: the individual before him, the need before him, the community before him. He acted with concerns for the particulars. And with that focus, he effected real change.

Sacrifice Over Self-Assertion

Fourth, and finally, if we want to seek to do justice, especially as we start out, we should pursue sacrifice over self-assertion.

It is incredibly easy for our words and deeds in the area of justice, to become self-focused and self-asserting.

We tend to get more animated about justice issues that affect us directly. It’s not wrong for us to get animated about those things. But if we only get worked up about injustice when it is affecting us, then we may not actually be seeking to “do justice.” We may just be looking out for ourselves.

Similarly, when we speak to justice issues, it can be very easy for our words to become more about us than about the issue we claim to speak about. David Foster Wallace talks about how in all communication there are at least two things going on: we are trying to communicate some sort of content (the thing we are talking about), and we are trying to communicate something about ourselves: the kind of person we are. There’s always a bit of both going on in almost any communication, and that’s not necessarily a bad thing. The problem is when the concern for what we communicate about ourselves is the driving force when it should not be. This results in what is commonly called virtue signaling – a pattern that is common for human beings of all sorts of ideologies and theologies. We are all at risk. And so, when we speak, we need to consider: am I really laboring here to help increase understanding before me and this other person – am I sacrificially working for their benefit, or is this about me just affirming and asserting who I am, and how right I am? [Wallace, 112-115]

So we can see this tendency towards self-assertion over sacrifice when we consider which areas of justice we tend to focus on. We see it in how we speak about such issues. But we can see it in our deeds as well.

It is not new that we are often tempted to do good deeds in order to assert ourselves in the eyes of others. Jesus said:

“Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. “Thus, when you give to the

needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” [Matthew 6:1-4]

For Francis, this meant focusing on how to sacrificially serve others, while cultivating something of a holy indifference towards how others viewed his social status.

Francis himself sought to associate with the lowly, sacrificing his social status in a society that was very concerned with social hierarchy. There were many ways he could have pursued his goals in a way that would have asserted his status. He chose instead to pursue a life of self-sacrifice.

In his admonitions to his followers, Francis wrote: “Blessed is the servant who does not consider himself any better when he is praised and exalted by people than when he is considered worthless, simple, and looked down upon, for what a person is before God, that he is and no more.” [*Admonitions* XIX.1]

In the early version of his rule for his followers he wrote: “Let all the brothers strive to follow the humility [...] of our Lord Jesus Christ. [...] They must rejoice when they live among people considered of little value and looked down upon, among the poor and powerless, the sick and lepers, and the beggars by the wayside.” [*The Earlier Rule*, IX.1-2]

In that same document, he pointed to the words of Christ in Matthew 20: “The rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them and the great ones make their authority over them felt; it shall not be so among the brothers. Let whoever wishes to be the greater among them be their ministers and servant. Let whoever is the greater among them become the least.” [*The Earlier Rule*, V.10-12]

Francis dedicated himself to the needs of those of other classes, rather than his own. He associated himself with those who were often despised. And he labored away at deeds that were often thought ridiculous by other people.

What if Christians increased their passionate engagement on issues that not only affected them, but on issues that affected others? What if Christians grew less concerned with being seen as right, and proving their intellectual or moral superiority to those they disagreed with, and were more concerned to honestly engage in dialogue on important issues? What if more Christians sacrificially served in ways that deflected attention from themselves and focused on simply serving others and pointing them to Christ?

Now, to be sure, there are many Christians who already serve in these ways. Many of us can list those who are like this, whom we know. They are tremendous gifts and assets to the kingdom. But what if more of us lived like that? What if more of us sought that kind of service in courageous deeds, focused on particular needs around us?

Would that not come closer to Micah’s call to “do justice” than the panoramic declarations and critiques we so often make, which draw more attention to us than to the actual victims of

injustice?

Conclusion

Pursuing deeds over declarations. Courage over critique. The particular over the panoramic. Sacrifice over self-assertion.

These are not moral laws. They are often wisdom issues. But they are wisdom issues rooted in the patterns by which we see God work in the world. They are patterns by which God's people have often been effective in the past. And they are patterns that take as a starting point that as Micah has recorded, we are not only to discuss and to debate justice, but to *do* justice. They are patterns rooted in the conviction, as James has told us, that faithfulness is not found primarily in debating which economic system will work best for the needy, but by actually visiting orphans and widows in their affliction. They are patterns that take seriously the warning of James that we may be tempted to tell our brothers and sisters in need to “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,’ without [actually] giving them the things needed for the body.”

With such warnings in mind, we should be wary of running to panoramic and self-asserting declarations and critiques when we are trying to “do justice.”

Instead, we should probably consider focusing on deeds that take a bit of courage, that focus on the particular, and require at least a bit of sacrifice on our behalf.

For that at least echoes the pattern by which Christ saved the world. And certainly, if we try to follow in his footsteps, we cannot go too far astray as we seek to do justice.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

- Chesterton, G. K. *Saint Francis of Assisi*. New York, NY: Doubleday, 1924. Printed 2001.
- Cunningham, Lawrence S. *Francis of Assisi: Performing the Gospel Life*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004.
- Francis of Assisi: The Saint*. Francis of Assisi: Early Documents. Vol 1. Edited by Regis Armstrong, et al. New York, NY: New City Press, 1999.
- Keller, Timothy. *Generous Justice*. New York, NY: Penguin, 2010.
- Keller, Timothy. "A Biblical Critique of Secular Justice and Critical Theory." *Gospel in Life*. Special Edition 2020. August 2020.
- Keller, Timothy, "Justice in the Bible." *Gospel in Life*. Quarter 3 2020. September 2020.
- Manselli, Raoul. *St Francis of Assisi*. Translated by Paul Duggan. Chicago, IL: Franciscan Herald Press, 1988
- Wallace, David Foster. "Authority and American Usage" in *Consider the Lobster*. New York, NY: Back Bay Books, 2006 (Essay from 1999). [Note: There are essays in this collection that I would *not* recommend for most audiences.]

On Reading About Francis:

There are *many* biographies of Francis out there. The modern biography that most impacted me eleven years ago, when I was focusing on Francis, was Raoul Manselli's *St. Francis of Assisi*, translated from Italian into English. It is, unfortunately, out of print, but used copies are available online.

If you are more interested in primary sources, Regis Armstrong has edited all of the writings of Francis and all the biographies from the first 150 years after his death into three volumes, in a new English translation.

G.K. Chesterton's biography of Francis is a popular one, and an enjoyable read that does helpfully frame and describe some of what made Francis so extraordinary. That said, you should be warned that Chesterton does not always take a critical approach to sifting through the reliable biographies and the more legendary ones, and in some ways, you get at least as much Chesterton in the book as you get Francis.

Lawrence Cunningham's short biography is also a good read with a good perspective on Francis, and maybe a good place to start if you want to read a short biography on him.