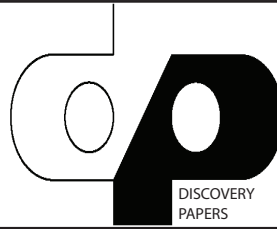


THE KING'S JUSTICE

**SERIES: A LIFE OF PASSION:
THE STORY OF DAVID.**



Catalog No. 20160522
2 Samuel 21:1-22
36th Message
Paul Taylor
May 22, 2016

2 Samuel 21:1-22

During the first half of the 20th century, in the early 1900s, the Australian government had a policy of assimilating their aboriginal population into greater society. One of the ways they did this was to relocate native children, especially mixed-race, into white families or institutional homes. The long term goal was complete integration of the aboriginal population into mainstream white society.

These children became known as the “stolen generation.” In 1997 a report titled *Bringing Them Home* was released. It had been commissioned by the federal Attorney-General a few years earlier in an effort to truly understand what had happened with these children. This report estimated that at least 100,000 children had been removed from their homes. Families were broken apart, children were sometimes mistreated, and a cultural heritage was washed away as a result of this policy.

Lest we be unfairly picking on our Australian friends, similar practices existed throughout North America. The treatment of aboriginal and native populations has long been a blemish on many of our countries.

Decades after these policies in Australia had stopped, the effects lingered. Lives had been forever altered. So began the difficult question of how to address these issues. How do you fix a violation of that magnitude? How do you make reparations for injustice? How do you set right something that has gone so wrong?

Today we're continuing our series in the life of David called *A Life of Passion*. We are in the chapter of David's life that we've labeled “elder.” The concern is shifting to what happens after David is gone. Many commentators believe that these next few chapters don't follow chronologically. They are more of an epilogue, summarizing some relevant stories as a way to look back over David's reign.

This morning we're looking at a situation in Israel not very different from what happened in Australia in the early 20th century. Saul, the previous king, had mistreated a people group. His administration had violated the rights of some people living within Israel's territory. In essence, a covenant had been broken. David has to figure out how to set things right in a way that honors God and satisfies the people who had been hurt. David has to learn about dispensing the king's justice.

How do you feel when someone cuts you off on the highway? What would you do if you got back to your car in the parking lot and there was a huge scratch along the side? What if someone held you up and stole your money? What if you or your children were assaulted?

One of the deepest values that we hold as people is that we are not supposed to be treated unfairly. We are indignant when someone takes advantage of us. From the earliest age, children learn to apply this natural sense of justice to different situations in their lives. “It's not fair!” is the heartfelt cry of toddler and executive alike.

Incidentally, this is one of the strongest indications of the existence of God. Fairness is hardly an attribute that would necessarily evolve. You don't see animals furious over being treated differently than their companions. But we, men and women, are created in the image of God. Justice matters to us.

And yet, even though we are created in the image of God, we see justice through our own eyes. When we are wronged, we want to wrong in return. When someone hurts us, our natural inclination is that they be hurt as a consequence. We tend to want what our Hollywood movies show us: vengeance and retribution. Deep in our heart lays the call, not just to find justice, but to get even.

How do we sort through all these conflicting desires? How do we make sense of justice, restitution, retribution and vengeance? It's hard enough as a parent to adequately administer justice within your family. How can we see justice expressed on a local or national or international scale?

These are the questions that our passage this morning will address. David will wrestle with these issues. After some false starts, he will discover the kind of justice that pleases the heart of God. And we will see how this justice can be carried forward to future generations. Ultimately, we will reflect on what following Jesus in Silicon Valley has to do with seeing justice in our world.

The Effects of Injustice

Injustice mostly lives beneath the surface of society. It can be hard to recognize. Victims are afraid to come forward. Perpetrators conceal their actions. But you can often see the visible effects of injustice. Clues that something is wrong. Indications that things aren't the way they are supposed to be. That's how our story begins.

2 Samuel 21:1

Now there was a famine in the days of David for three years, year after year. And David sought the face of the Lord. And the Lord said, "There is bloodguilt on Saul and on his house, because he put the Gibeonites to death."

The problem that can be seen is that there is a famine. Food isn't growing. Maybe there was a drought or a disease or something else entirely. But this was a big problem. David was the king and his people couldn't eat. He had to do something.

So he asked God. The text says that he sought the face of the LORD. This is a very significant and unusual phrase. "Seeking the face" is usually used to describe someone making requests of their leader: a king or earthly ruler. This is the first time it is used to say that someone seeks the face of the LORD. Here it's used of David coming before God. He asks what can be done about the problem that he sees: the famine in his land.

David was probably surprised by the answer. The problem wasn't about food or climate or famine. The problem was the presence of injustice in his kingdom. Something wrong had been done and it hadn't been set right. The problem that he could see was because of a problem that was much harder to see. But God showed it to him.

Our bedroom has laminate flooring that runs in a line. That means that the four legs of our bed hit the planks in a certain position. What drives me crazy is when it isn't straight. One of the legs is on one side of the line. The other is off center. When that's the case, I have to move the bed. To line it up. Set it straight.

God says that this is the case in David's kingdom. Something isn't lined up. The world is off-kilter because of injustice that hasn't been addressed.

The issue is that a covenant had been broken. Joshua 9 tells the story of how generations earlier, the Gibeonites tricked Joshua into making a treaty with them when he settled in the Promised Land. They had been a protected people ever since. Saul violated that agreement. We aren't told exactly what he did. But somehow, he broke the ancient truce.

This might not seem very important. Almost four centuries had passed since that treaty. Did it really still matter?

But the breaking of a covenant is serious business. Covenants allow two parties to come together in trust and intimacy. Marriage is a covenant. Covenants are how God is described as relating to his people. Covenants protect relationships. When they are broken, something is very wrong.

Today, we live in a world of broken covenants. People take jobs with promised wages that turn out to be false. Women are trafficked and sold into situations in which they can't escape. People live in poverty in our back yard under conditions so unfairly stacked against them that no amount of hard work could ever allow them to succeed. All of this matters to God. Broken covenants matter.

So what do we do? Injustice practically defines our world. It's rampant. How do we respond?

Justice Sought

Our tendency is to be overcome with the enormity of the situation. There is so much injustice, such long-lasting hurt and conflict. How can anything we do possibly make a difference?

You can imagine that David might have felt some of this. In fact, we've seen David frozen by passivity in other areas of his life. But not here. Here he takes action. His people were starving. He was the king. Something had to be done. So he starts in the place where healing begins: with the victims.

2 Samuel 21:3:

And David said to the Gibeonites, "What shall I do for you? And how shall I make atonement, that you may bless the heritage of the Lord?"

David reaches out to the Gibeonites. He asks them what he can do to make things right. He speaks of atonement. This is the fixing of what has been broken. The straightening of the legs of my bed so they line up nicely along the planks of the floor.

Take note of this: justice is not impossible. David does not throw up his hands and say, "Oh well. A four-hundred-year-old covenant has been broken. The world is just full of injustice. What can really be done?" He steps into the situation. David thinks that he can do something to address the injustice. Do we think that way?

David reaches out to the injured party. He asks the victims what they want. The Gibeonites tell him in verses 5-6:

They said to the king, "The man who consumed us and planned to destroy us, so that we should have no place in all the territory of Israel, let seven of his sons be given to us, so that we may hang them before the Lord at Gibeah of Saul, the chosen of the Lord." And the king said, "I will give them."

The Gibeonites had been wronged by Saul. He broke the ancient covenant. So they want justice to be taken against the sons of Saul. They ask for complete vengeance. They want to hang seven of Saul's sons. Now, even though this doesn't make a lot of sense in our culture, this request was actually in accordance with the laws of tribal membership in the ancient world. This follows cultural norms for justice in the ancient world.

David's decisions here are incredible. He thinks he can do something. He asks the victims. And he gives them what they ask for as restitution. David seems to believe a simple idea. This is the idea that I'm hoping we become convinced of this morning.

The people of God, by the power of God, can bring the justice of God.

Now, we may have some questions about this picture of justice. Is the request of the victims fair? Should David have given them exactly what they wanted? Is this the kind of justice that we should aim for in our world?

It helps to realize that a lot has changed since the arrival of Jesus. God views justice differently after the death and resurrection of Jesus. And societies have changed the way they understand justice because of how the message of Jesus has permeated culture over the last two millennia.

But we make a mistake if we think that because of Jesus, God no longer values justice. Some think that because Jesus said to turn the other cheek, Christians should accept injustice. People inadvertently conclude that Jesus' message of forgiveness means that God no longer believes in seeing evildoers brought to account.

And yet the New Testament is clear on this. Several passages teach the responsibility of government to punish evil (Romans 13:4, 1 Peter 2:14). The prophecies of the New Testament are clear that Jesus will return to judge those who perpetrate injustice (Romans 2:16, Acts 17:31, Revelation 19:12). And Jesus himself, when he walked on the earth, challenged those who abused their power (Luke 20:47, Matthew 21:12).

Some things have changed about justice. But some things have decidedly not changed. What we see in this passage is David's understanding that justice requires evildoers to be punished. This has not changed with the coming of Jesus. God's forgiveness does not mean that earthly consequences are wiped away. Divine mercy does not mean that earthly punishment is no longer necessary.

This idea was made clear to me the first time I heard Gary Haugen, the founder of International Justice Mission (IJM), speak. It was at the annual IJM Banquet, held every year in San Francisco. Gary used the analogy of people drowning in a river. He pointed out that most Christian ministries focus on saving people who are drowning in a river. This is an important work and not in any way to be minimized. Victims need to be rescued.

But Gary said that the focus of IJM was slightly different. While they did rescue victims, they had a broader approach. Instead of just rescuing the people drowning in the river, they walked upstream. They tried to stop the guy who was throwing people into the river. They worked with law enforcement agencies and local legal systems to ensure that perpetrators were punished.

This is important for several reasons. Bringing perpetrators to justice proves to be a strong deterrent to further injustice. If people know they might get caught and punished, they are far less likely to oppress others. But it's just as important to restore justice to a community. Evil cannot be tolerated. Injustice must be made right.

David understood this. That's why he listened to the victims and made restitution according to what they asked for. He did what he could to make right the wrong that had been done. David believed and acted on the idea that the people of God by the power of God can bring the justice of God.

Grief Expressed

But David didn't get it quite right. We had some questions about this scene. And once again, we see a woman in the story helping the king to see his mistake. This time it's Rizpah, the mother of two of the men who were hanged by the Gibeonites. Read her response.

2 Samuel 21:10 :

Then Rizpah the daughter of Aiah took sackcloth and spread it for herself on the rock, from the beginning of harvest until rain fell upon them from the heavens. And she did not allow the birds of the air to come upon them by day, or the beasts of the field by night.

This mother grieves publicly for a long time. She is heartbroken not only that her sons are dead, but that their bodies were left exposed. She covers the bodies to protect them. She wants to restore some dignity to them.

David's act has brought justice, but it has also brought grief. You may remember the passage from Deuteronomy quoted in Galatians 3:13, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree." David was right to listen to the victims of injustice. But he has allowed them not only to punish evildoers, but to desecrate them. These young men were dishonored and humiliated.

It's natural when you have been hurt to want to hurt in return. When someone wrongs us, we want to get even. We want revenge and retribution. This is what the Gibeonites asked for. David allowed them to go further than seeing justice done. He allowed them to take vengeance.

This is one reason that Christians can be skeptical of justice. It can seem that retribution and punishment and vengeance are the only kind of justice that exists. We know that it's very possible to go too far. We know that Christ forgives. We know that our God is a God of mercy. So we are uncomfortable with any kind of justice.

Dignity in Justice

The beautiful thing about what David does is that he continues to seek justice. He didn't get it right the first time. But David doesn't give up. First, he believes that he can do something about injustice in his world. Then, when he gets it wrong and goes too far, he thinks he can fix it to make it right.

2 Samuel 21:11-14a:

When David was told what Rizpah the daughter of Aiah, the concubine of Saul, had done, 12 David went and took the bones of Saul and the bones of his son Jonathan from the men of Jabesh-gilead, who had stolen them from the public square of Beth-shan, where the Philistines had hanged them, on the day the Philistines killed Saul on Gilboa. 13 And he brought up from there the bones of Saul and the bones of his son Jonathan; and they gathered the bones of those who were hanged. 14 And they buried the bones of Saul and his son Jonathan in the land of Benjamin in Zela, in the tomb of Kish his father. And they did all that the king commanded.

David heard about this mother, weeping for her dishonored children and protecting their bodies from further shame. He heard about it, so he took action. Again.

David collected their bodies. He collected the bones of Saul and his son Jonathan. He "brought up" those bones – that phrase probably refers to some kind of an official ceremony. He gave all of these men – his enemies – a proper burial. They were buried in the land of their ancestors in the tomb of their father.

David restored their dignity.

This is an incredible act. For a sitting king to confer dignity on his unrelated predecessor was unheard of. David did it because he was trying to find that elusive combination of justice mixed with dignity. That place where mercy and truth meet. Where evildoers are punished, but are treated as those who still bear the image of God.

This is biblical justice. When people commit evil, they do not lose their status as divine image bearers. Breaking a covenant is serious business. But even covenant breakers deserve dignity. Evildoers must be punished. But justice must be combined with dignity.

We know how important this is because of how this story ends. What happens when justice is carried out with dignity?

2 Samuel 21:14:

And after that God responded to the plea for the land.

God didn't respond when the seven sons were hanged. That was insufficient justice. God didn't respond when Rizpah expressed her grief. She protected her sons from further humiliation, but she didn't have the power to restore their honor. Not until David "brought up" their bones and buried them in the tomb of their father. Not until justice was combined with dignity. At that point, God responded.

What happens when justice is combined with dignity? God is pleased. God is pleased with justice.

This principle has application to many areas of life. It's true in international relations. It's true for law enforcement agencies. It's true for governments and communities and schools. But it's true on a personal level as well. The same principle holds true in our families, in our friendships, and in our workplaces.

This is what ought to characterize the lives of those who follow Jesus. We believe in justice combined with dignity. And it is what we ought to work to see characterize the world that we live in. This is what the kingdom of God is like. God's kingdom is characterized by justice for everyone. Victims, perpetrators, men, women, executives, and the unemployed.

God has helped David to do this in his kingdom. David sought the face of the LORD. God helped him to see the need for justice and then to course correct when he saw the need for dignity. After his first mistake, David demonstrates this truth.

The people of God through the power of God can bring the justice of God.

Will it Last?

Remember that we are in the last days of David's reign. It's great that David manages to bring biblical justice to his kingdom, at least in this case. But we still have an important question to consider. Will it last? Will justice characterize the people of God? Or will it be a fleeting shadow?

The little vignette in verses 15-22 is meant to address that concern.

2 Samuel 21:15:

There was war again between the Philistines and Israel, and David went down together with his servants, and they fought against the Philistines. And David grew weary.

Even great leaders grow old. They run out of energy. David grew weary. Perhaps David was able to bring some measure of justice to the nation as her king. But now he is weary. What will happen when he is gone?

What follows is the story of four giants. These are physically extraordinarily gifted soldiers along the lines of Goliath, whom David slew at the beginning of his career. That happened when David was a nobody. It was his first public act of heroism and justice. To this day, it is probably David's most famous act - the slaying of Goliath.

The following verses summarize the slaying of four more giants. Not by David, but by the men that come after him. First, Ishbi-benob is killed by Abishai. Then Sibbecai strikes down Saph. Next Elahanan strikes down another Goliath. But the fourth giant is my favorite.

2 Samuel 21:20-22:

And there was again war at Gath, where there was a man of great stature, who had six fingers on each hand, and six toes on each foot, twenty-four in number, and he also was descended from the giants. 21 And when he taunted Israel, Jonathan the son of Shimei, David's brother, struck him down. 22 These four were descended from the giants in Gath, and they fell by the hand of David and by the hand of his servants.

Here we have the original six-fingered man. Of course the most famous six-fingered man is Count Dracula. He was the man whom young Inigo Montoya saw kill his father. That led to a lifetime of searching for the six-fingered man to dispense justice to his father's killer.

Incidentally, I also read a news article about a six-fingered man in India who was moving to Britain to apply for a job as a typist. Apparently having an extra digit can lead to advantages in sword fighting as well as speed typing.

But this six-fingered man was a warrior from Gath. And Jonathan, David's nephew, struck him down. The conclusion of the story is this: "they fell by the hand of David and by the hand of his servants."

Here's the point of all of this: God's work of justice will continue. It isn't limited to one man. David isn't the only man who can kill a giant. David isn't the only king who can lead a nation. David isn't the only one of God's people who can bring the justice of God.

Good leaders give rise to more good leaders. David was an exceptional military leader and a skilled politician. All of that has been multiplied in his people. These verses are meant to assure us that justice won't die with David.

The Justice of Christ

However, the kings after David weren't very good. David's son Solomon was wise beyond measure. His riches were legendary. But his leadership made the nation susceptible to a civil war upon his death because of the lack of justice. The kings that followed were mostly selfish and abusive.

And so the land waited for the one who would come in the line of David. The people yearned for a leader who would bring forth justice and righteousness. Not just once, but for all time. God promised to send such a leader. Read how he is described.

Isaiah 42:1-4:

Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. 2 He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; 3 a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. 4 He will not grow faint or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his law.

Do you see it? The combination of justice with dignity? This leader. The servant of God. The son of David. He will bring justice with dignity. He will be the leader who comes in the line of David.

God's people in the Old Testament were promised a Messiah who would come to bring justice. And he came. Jesus came. The son of David walked the earth and demonstrated in his life and ministry the perfect model of justice. He even became a victim of injustice so that he could bring life and peace to the world.

If we follow Jesus, we follow the son of David who rules justly. That gives us a unique role of helping those in our families, in our communities, and around the world to see a healthy model of justice rightly administered. We can recognize cases of injustice in our local community: housing, trafficking, salary policies, racial inequities, law enforcement, and more. And we can help our community to implement justice with dignity.

As followers of Jesus, who was sent to "faithfully bring forth justice," we have a responsibility to be people of justice. If we are to be the people of God and please the God of justice, then we are called to seek justice.

When my kids were very little, I would sometimes ask them to help me with house projects. I might ask them to help me paint a wall, but toddlers aren't very good at painting. So I would come back later and redo everything they had done. I would paint over their work. I wanted to include them in the project, but they were too young to do anything really helpful. Their work was symbolic. It was only for their sake. They didn't really help at all.

A lot of Christians think that this is the way God has asked us to work in the world. Yes, we're supposed to do things because God wants to include us. We can paint our little part of the wall. But when Jesus returns he's going to paint over it because we can't actually do the work of God. We're just children.

But that is an incredibly deficient view of God, of his Spirit that indwells us, and of the calling that he has given his church. We are not simply doing things to feel important. When we do anything of value, it is God working through us. When the church seeks justice, it is Jesus bringing justice through his church.

There will come a day when Jesus will return and complete his work. But it will be like adding the trim and the detail. Jesus will make a good work perfect. He will not replace it. We look forward to Jesus' return for the completed work of justice. We cannot bring complete justice. But we can contribute meaningfully here and now.

The people of God, by the power of God, can bring in the justice of God.

Conclusion

The Australian government is still trying to find the best way to make restitution for the effects of the stolen generation. They issued a national apology in 2008. They celebrate a national "Sorry Day" to continue that remorse. They have committed money and time and energy to making amends. But it is still a current issue. Many still find justice to be lacking.

This morning we have witnessed an incredible story of David finding and administering justice. He saw the effects of injustice. He sought the face of God in an effort to deal with it. He took action to punish the evildoers.

And he got it wrong. But that didn't stop him. David tried again to correct the imbalance of justice. Finally he found that combination of justice with dignity. Then, and only then, God was pleased.

So what do we do? How do we respond?

First, we change our hearts. We recognize the injustice in our world and accept our calling to step into complicated situations. Following Jesus in Silicon Valley doesn't just mean surviving for ourselves. It may mean using the influence and position and resources that God has entrusted to us to work for justice.

As our hearts change, we will find ourselves called to act. Maybe it's advocating for fair housing policies in our backyard. Maybe it's getting trained to recognize victims of trafficking. Maybe it's working to balance race or gender inequalities in the workplace. You can't do everything. But you can do something.

One very practical thing that you can do is to come back tonight to pray with IJM. This organization has always impressed me by the high value they place on prayer. For a group of lawyers who love to take action, they pray more than anyone else I know. Come tonight to seek the face of God. Hear more about God's heart and pray for the work of justice in the world.

Injustice is everywhere. It's a huge issue. But our God is bigger. And we have his Spirit. We are his people.

The people of God, by the power of God, can bring the justice of God.