

2022.10.09 - The Blessed Battle - Groaning For Justice

So What? Groaning for justice leads to blessedness.

Feel What? Challenged.

Now What? How is God inviting you to engage in works of justice? Where do you need to turn away from apathy and inactivity?

INTRODUCTION

Hello and welcome. If I haven't met you yet, my name is Josh and I'm one of the pastors here. We're continuing our message series called "The Blessed Battle" where we're studying what are known as the Beatitudes. We thought it would be a good practice to read them together as a church community. My son, John, will read them for us this week.

Reader: From the fifth chapter in the Gospel of Matthew:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thank you, John.

Before we dig into the Beatitudes, I think it would be helpful to step back and look at how Jesus frames his earthly ministry. And when we do that, we find something interesting:

Luke 4:16-19, NIV: He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

This proclamation set the tone for Jesus’ ministry and is a kind of mission statement for him. He went around proclaiming forgiveness and welcoming all into God’s kingdom.

And here the final parable Jesus told, in the last public teaching Jesus gave in his ministry:

Matthew 25:31-40, NIV: “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’ “Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ “The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’”

What do the poor, prisoners, the blind, and the oppressed have in common? They are intimately acquainted with their need for a rescuer in ways the wealthy, the free, the healthy, and the privileged overlook. From the get go of his ministry, Jesus identified with these kinds of disadvantaged and sought to lift them up and lift them out of their situation. And more so, through his teaching ministry, he has empowered his church to be actively involved in this same work.

Mark Scandrette, *The Ninefold Path of Jesus:* “How does the world become better? When we decide to use our power for good. The whole universe is God’s

creative realm. We have been given a small piece of that as our personal 'kingdom' to manage. Our bodies. Our minds. Our time. Our money and possessions and the influence we have in relationships. We are being invited to adopt a new identity as agents of liberation. We are invited to care about everything our Creator cares about: the dignity of human life at every stage, care of creation for future generations, just and sustainable economic policies, and care of immigrants and the poor, to name a few."

As we read this quote, this probably bring up some questions about what our responsibility is as people in our world today. And, certainly, there are some tensions we must navigate anytime we talk about justice.

3 Common Reactions To Injustice:

1. Trivialize It

You can view the world as being not that bad. There is research and statistics about how things have improved.

But this results in a blame game where everyone who doesn't have what you do is most likely lazy or under utilizing their resources. And there's an unhelpful nostalgia about the past when things were better and people got along.

And there becomes a reactionary resistance towards conversations about how to improve the world. There was a political commentator in recent memory who said that if your church talks about social justice, get out of there as fast as you can.

2. Totalize It

Talk of injustice can become all consuming as you see it sitting behind every behavior, system, and responsible for every ill of society. Groups of people can no longer be taken at face value because they're the ones in power and they can victimize others with their very words.

This results in a widespread antagonizing where everyone who doesn't agree with you is the enemy and is ripe to be bullied and canceled. And there's an idolization of all progress towards a supposed utopia where if everyone was educated and had the same opportunities, there would be an equality of outcomes.

You may have seen this on social media recently where there's a decree saying, "If your pastor doesn't say something about [this week's tragedy/scandal], then you need to leave your church!"

3. Spiritualize It

Often our Western hermeneutic, or method of interpreting Scripture, takes over and we hear this in spiritual terms to apply to our lives. Prisoners becomes those in spiritual bondage to their addictions, the blind become those who aren't able to perceive God's love, and the oppressed are those in need of deliverance. This can be helpful, but we ought not rush past the plain text.

This results in a lack of potency in the gospel and an obliviousness as people are struggling around you.

Transition: Jesus shows us a better way of following him and working for justice in our world.

SOLUTION

Again, Jesus says:

Matthew 5:6, NIV: “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”

When we first look at this verse, thirsting for righteousness stands out to us because it's such drastic language. What does it mean to hunger and thirst for something? It goes beyond a simple desire for a sip of water or a nibble of chocolate. What Jesus is referring to is a visceral need, something that reaches into the central core of who we are and is displayed for all to see. It's not worries about decorum or what's proper for the moment. Maybe a way that articulates is for us is a guttural groan—something that demonstrates how we're not ok with the way things are.

But, then, the righteousness piece. Righteousness, as we're used to understanding it, is our personal standing before God. It's what Jesus came to do for us, to make us right with God. So, we could understand this as a groan for a right relationship with God, or with our continuing holiness as we grow and act more like Jesus. This can sort of make sense, but I don't think this describes all of what Jesus meant when he says those who thirst for righteousness will be filled.

Instead, it's important to know that the original word in the Scripture for “righteousness” can also be “justice.” Both in Greek and Hebrew, these two words are used interchangeably. For example:

Psalm 89:14, NIV: Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne....

Looking at this verse,

Tony Evans: “This is not a seesaw where sometimes you go for righteousness and other times for justice. These are twin towers—they are always to be balanced. Righteousness is the moral standard of right and wrong based on God’s divine standard. Justice is the equitable and impartial application of God’s moral law in society. And God wants both.”

Putting this altogether, Jesus is telling his original audience that the weight of oppression will not always be there. For the groan they feel will be taken away and their deepest desires for justice will be satisfied.

And, to us, Jesus is saying to be actively involved in removing injustice so that everyone everywhere may be welcomed into God’s kingdom and the flourishing and fulfillment it provides.

Mark Scandrette, *The Ninefold Path of Jesus*: “It’s easy to feel less urgency about changing unjust systems when they benefit us or we are insulated from the pain they cause. James, the brother of Jesus wrote, ‘If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn’t do it, it is sin for them.’ If we aren’t actively working for change on both personal and systemic levels, then we are complicit in keeping things the way they are. The system is indeed broken, but we are that system. If we want to see change, it will have to begin with us—with our hearts and minds, our actions, our voices, and our votes. This Beatitude invites us to move from apathy to agency: Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for [justice], for they [will] be satisfied.”

Transition: Let’s talk about ways we can be involved and the postures necessary to be effective.

APPLICATION

- **Do: Find your why.**
 - What keeps you up at night because you can’t sleep knowing this injustice exists?
- **Don’t: Assume your cause is everyone’s cause.**
 - Because we are the Body of Christ made of up many parts, there are different causes that animate us. God has put variety into his Church so differing needs

can be met.

- **Do: Embrace defiant joy.**

- Remember how Jesus ended his mission statement: “To proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” He was referring to the concept of Jubilee, a regular rhythm where debts were forgiven, prisoners were released, and there was a national celebration. In the midst of oppression and cruelty, God sent his Son as a walking embodiment of freedom and celebration—joy that pushes back against the darkness.
- This is important because as Jon Tyson writes in his book ***Beautiful Resistance***: “**Neurobiologists have shown that while the majority of the brain’s development stops during childhood, there is one location in the right orbital prefrontal cortex that has the ability to grow throughout your life. This has been called the ‘joy center.’ One book’s authors observed, ‘When the joy center has been sufficiently developed, it regulates emotions, pain control and immunity centers; it guides us to act like ourselves; it releases neurotransmitters like dopamine and serotonin; and it is the only part of the brain that overrides the main drive centers—food and sexual impulses, terror and rage.’ Without sufficient “joy strength,” we spend our lives trying to fill the deficit.**”

- **Don’t: Give in to apathy and learned helplessness.**

- Apathy sees needs but turns a blind eye. Learned helplessness justifies itself by saying, “That’s not my problem. What could I do anyway?”

- **Do: Prepare for a marathon pace.**

- If you treat working for justice like a sprint, this will guarantee you’ll be burned out. It’s important that we partner with others, especially those who have gone before us and build foundations that we can build on.

- **Don’t: Practice hair on fire activism.**

- We see examples everyday of people who, when they can’t persuade others to join their cause, use fear and anger to gather a crowd. Outrage is powerful in this age of digital connectedness, but it’s brittle and cannot overpower joy.

OBJECTIONS

Now, to some of us here, we've been the recipients of injustice or know someone very close to us who has. Not just your everyday slights, like someone cutting you off or taking the last piece of cake. But real, visceral, traumatic violence. Nationwide, 81% of women and 43% of men reported experiencing some form of sexual harassment and/or assault in their lifetime. If that's you, know that we see you and we are with you. Talking about injustice may cause you to have a reaction as you're reminded and triggered. Thank you for hearing me out. And thank you for showing up when others receive their justice, but you're still waiting for yours. I don't have easy answers for why that is, and I won't give you any cliches to bandaid over the wound.

What I would say, though, is that the fight for justice can often be restorative and redemptive. Remember, Jesus hasn't received justice yet for crimes committed against him. But he groans and he fights on to bring freedom to the world. So let's link arms and move together toward justice, not to minimize or forget your pain, but to walk towards Jesus for the renewal of all things.

INSPIRATION

Black Panther & Wonder Woman have crossed arms signifying an embrace of identity as those responsible for change; posture of resistance towards status quo.

CONCLUSION

This Week's Practice:

- How is God inviting you to engage in works of justice? Where do you need to turn away from apathy and inactivity?

Prayer

Invitation