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Sermon Series: *We are for...*, No. 4

(Real) Justice for All

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Deuteronomy 27:9-26 (NIV)

Then Moses and the Levitical priests said to all Israel, "Be silent, Israel, and listen! You have now become the people of the Lord your God. ¹⁰ Obey the Lord your God and follow his commands and decrees that I give you today."

¹¹ On the same day Moses commanded the people: ¹² When you have crossed the Jordan, these tribes shall stand on Mount Gerizim to bless the people: Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Joseph and Benjamin. ¹³ And these tribes shall stand on Mount Ebal to pronounce curses: Reuben, Gad, Asher, Zebulun, Dan and Naphtali.

¹⁴ The Levites shall recite to all the people of Israel in a loud voice:

¹⁵ "Cursed is anyone who makes an idol – a thing detestable to the Lord, the work of skilled hands – and sets it up in secret." Then all the people shall say, "Amen!"

¹⁶ "Cursed is anyone who dishonors their father or mother." Then all the people shall say, "Amen!"

¹⁷ "Cursed is anyone who moves their neighbor's boundary stone." Then all the people shall say, "Amen!"

¹⁸ "Cursed is anyone who leads the blind astray on the road." Then all the people shall say, "Amen!"

¹⁹ "Cursed is anyone who withholds justice from the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow." Then all the people shall say, "Amen!"

²⁰ "Cursed is anyone who sleeps with his father's wife, for he dishonors his father's bed." Then all the people shall say, "Amen!"

²¹ "Cursed is anyone who has sexual relations with any animal." Then all the people shall say, "Amen!"

²² "Cursed is anyone who sleeps with his sister, the daughter of his father or the daughter of his mother." Then all the people shall say, "Amen!"

²³ "Cursed is anyone who sleeps with his mother-in-law." Then all the people shall say, "Amen!"

²⁴ "Cursed is anyone who kills their neighbor secretly." Then all the people shall say, "Amen!"

²⁵ "Cursed is anyone who accepts a bribe to kill an innocent person." Then all the people shall say, "Amen!"

²⁶ "Cursed is anyone who does not uphold the words of this law by carrying them out." Then all the people shall say, "Amen!"

Turn with me, if you would, back to that passage which was read this morning: the book of Deuteronomy, Chapter 27. Deuteronomy 27.

In many ways, we live in a society where followers of Jesus are known, primarily, for what they're *against*.

Some of that is due to the misperceptions of our culture, but certainly not all of it. Our own holiness movement heritage of years past actually perpetuated that.

And as I've said, it's not inherently bad to be against certain things; it's just that we'd better be able to articulate just as clearly, if not more so, what we are

for, as followers of Jesus, if we want to speak winsomely and successfully to our culture.

Which is why we've been considering, over these past weeks, some of the things Christ-followers are *for*.

So far, we've affirmed that Christians are *for* the *concept* and *reality of truth, absolute truth*, as the Psalmist saw and celebrated in God's revelation.

We are also *for* the *possibility of truly new beginnings* for persons, such as the Apostle Paul spoke of in Romans 6.

Last week, we said that Christians are *for* the importance of *remembering* and *valuing the past*: keeping the past works of God in clear view, so they can feed our faith in Him for the days to come. We heard this from Isaiah 46 as God called the Hebrew exiles to *remember* what their God had done for them in days past, so they could face the future with confidence and hope.

Today, we declare that followers of Jesus are *for justice*, and, of course, *justice for all*.

Now, talking about justice in our day and society can be a tricky thing. Like many words and concepts and even natural phenomena – I'm thinking about rainbows, for example – the word "Justice" has had a variety of meanings, nuances and adjectives put upon it by our society, and many of them wind up making it scripturally unrecognizable.

In some cases, justice has been put above gospel. In others, justice is demanded at any cost – including costs that are starkly unbiblical and immoral – as if the ends of justice should justify, literally, any means.

And largely in response to those sorts of things, others have written off the concept of justice entirely, presuming it's somehow "bad" at its core.

Somewhere around two years ago, a conservative commentator told his listeners, "If you hear a pastor talking about justice, it's time for you to leave that church."

That's how polarized and reactionary things have become regarding just the word, *justice*.

So, let's explore this a bit.

Let me say clearly here today that followers of Jesus are *for justice*. And the reason we are *for justice* is because *God is for justice!*

The fact is, one has to work quite hard to avoid seeing that reality in the Bible.

Christians are for justice because God is for justice.

At the same time, however, let's be clear about what Scriptural justice is: about what sort of justice it is that God is for, which I believe we can discover a bit about in this passage from Deuteronomy.

We can pick up the context of these verses by looking backward just a bit. Moses has just finished

reiterating God's laws: God's instructions to His people about how they could live successfully in this land that would soon be theirs.

It was something like sending your little kid off to school for the first time when you might say, "OK, Junior, remember to watch for the bus, and for heaven's sake, don't play out in the street while you wait. Now, when you get to school, remember not to leave your lunch on the bus, or you won't have anything to eat. Make sure you stay in line with the other kids so you don't get lost. Raise your hand when you want to participate – don't just shout out – and listen. If you ever don't know what to do, ask the teachers – they'll help you."

That's the sort of thing Moses has done here with the Israelites, all for the sake of their success in the land.

You know, as I think about it, what Moses did here is more like what a parent would do when they send their semi-adult kid off to college, but you get the idea.

Anyway, with the instructions of God reiterated, Moses then makes provision for the laws to be recorded in a way people can see them using plastered stone, as mentioned earlier in this chapter. They were to write the law on them and set them up on Mount Ebal, along with an altar there, and all of it was to serve as an ongoing visual aid for the purpose of helping Israel remember the importance of obeying the laws of God.

And then, getting into our text for today, Moses says, "*When you get into the land, put these six tribes of Israelites on Mount Ebal and the other six on Mount Gerizim and conduct this ceremony in which the priests and people all reaffirm their commitments together.*"

Now, this location is important, because Ebal and Gerizim overlook Shechem, a place full of Hebrew history. This is where Abraham was first told of the Promised Land and where he built his first altar to God. This is where Jacob had bought a plot of land and where Joseph's bones would soon be buried.

Their history lies before them here, you see?

But this was not just some commemoration of the past. They were to do all this upon entering the land to remind themselves of the importance of obeying all of God's law.

Why? Because only by their doing things God's way would they be able to experience His blessings. That's just how God has made His world to work.

The Israelites couldn't, and we can't, live lives (making decisions, conducting business, setting priorities) in ways that are contrary to the way God made us to work, and then somehow expect God to bless that.

That's like...well, that's like turning on the air conditioner and expecting to get heat, right? That just doesn't happen.

And God won't be mocked by our asking for that.

If we want to do things our own way: well, that's allowed. In most things of life, God gives us the freedom to choose that.

But we can hardly expect that things would then go well with us. We can hardly expect the blessings of God to come our way if we insist upon going against *His* way.

That's the message that Moses is trying to drive home here with the blessings and curses.

And by "curses," I should mention that, typically, it's not that God is out there with lightning bolts in His hands waiting for us to disobey so He can zap us – as if He gets a kick out of that.

That's not His nature.

Now, at times, He may discipline us specifically, and He certainly has the freedom to do that.

Typically though, the "curse" is just the natural consequence that comes from disobeying God's way. [Hold up/drop toy stuffed sheep.]

For example, God's *way* is gravity.

If you decide you're going to jump off a 20-story building in defiance of the way God made things to work, well, you can do that. But chances are, you're going to die. In this case, death is the "curse" of defiance and disobedience, you see?

Which is why, let me quickly add here, we see a noticeable difference in the number of curses verses the number of blessings that are mentioned.

Here in this ceremony that Chapter 27 describes, it's actually *all* curses.

If you read on, you get *some* blessings, but still, predominantly, curses.

This is common to other ancient near eastern treaties, but Vic Hamilton points out that here, this is likely Deuteronomy's way of emphasizing how, if left to their own devices, God's people simply will *not* have a promising future.

In other words, if they want a good future, they'd better take seriously what God takes seriously.

And that fact has not changed one bit from that day to this.

And based on all that Moses says here, what does God take seriously?

In a word: *justice*.

But what does that word "justice" really mean?

Put simply, *justice* means *giving each person what he or she deserves*. Cambridge says it's "*fairness in the way people are dealt with.*"

Now, I mentioned that our culture, here and there, has added quite a load onto the word "justice," making it seem much more complicated.

But in truth, justice is really pretty simple; justice is getting what we're due.

Of course, the question then becomes, "who determines what we're due?" And that's the key to *Biblical justice*.

Biblical justice is getting what we're due *according to God's determinations* – according to *God's* ideas of what is just and what is not, you see?

And that is God's prerogative: to set the standards, because He is the Creator. Now, the unsaved world around us may not accept that, but the Church must accept that.

If someone decides they're going to leave this world and create their own—out of nothing (I'd like to see them try), but if they do that, well then, sure, they can set their *own* standards in *that* world.

As long as we live *here* though, this is *God's world*, so *He* sets the standard of justice. *He* defines what is *just* and what is *not*. As Job declares, "*Surely, God will not act wickedly; the Almighty will not pervert justice.*" (Job 34:12).

Or, as Deuteronomy 32:4 says, "*God, the Rock! His work is perfect, for all His ways are just...*"

The same from Isaiah 61:8, "*For I, the Lord, love justice...*"

God made us, and He has no hesitation at all in demanding that we take our cues about justice—about what people are due—from *Him*.

Which is actually a *great blessing*, because He does a far better job than we do, when left to our own devices, as human history unfortunately proves.

So, as God's people (here in Deuteronomy: the Israelites; for you and me: the Church), God unapologetically calls us *to do as He does, and value what He values, and despise what He despises, and protect what He protects.*

That is doing justice. That is acting justly.

Micah 6:8: "*He has shown you...what... the Lord requires of you.*"

And what's the first thing on that list? "*To do justly.*"

That's why followers of Jesus are *for justice*.

In fact, that's why you cannot possibly be an intelligent, informed man or woman of God—you cannot possibly be a follower of Jesus—and be unconcerned about justice.

Moses is telling us right here that we will be at odds with God—life will not work as it's supposed to for us or those around us—if we are unconcerned about justice. And He spells out some of those principles of justice He cares about here in Chapter 27 in very detailed ways.

Really, all these curses result from injustice, of all different sorts. Take a look:

Verse 15: "*Cursed is anyone who makes an idol.*" Idolatry, you see, is doing injustice to God Himself. To suggest that anything or anyone other than God is worthy of worship treats God Himself unjustly: not giving Him what He is due, you see?

No wonder God has so much negative to say about idolatry all though the Bible. Check out the second commandment if you wonder about that.

Verse 16: "*Cursed is anyone who dishonors their father or mother.*" That's the fifth commandment, and breaking that amounts to treating your parents unjustly—not giving them the honor and respect that they're due, you see?

Verse 17: "*Cursed is anyone who moves their neighbor's boundary stone.*" That's treating our neighbor unjustly by taking their property: by appropriating for ourselves—the polite way of saying, "stealing"—what belongs to someone else.

Commandment number eight.

Some today actually advocate for this: taking of others' property, in order to do justly, as they claim, to someone else. I don't think God appreciates that, because I don't see anywhere in God's economy where two wrongs make a right.

Verse 18: "*Cursed is anyone who leads the blind astray on the road.*" This is injustice committed against someone by taking advantage of their compromised condition—exploiting another person's weakness for one's own gain.

That is utterly reprehensible to God—a violation of commandment number nine.

Verse 19: "*Cursed is anyone who withholds justice from the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow.*" God shows a special concern for the just treatment of those who find themselves on the margins of society—you see that all through the Bible.

Consequently, God is especially offended when those in the mainstream—when those with means and those with those naturally advantaged—choose to exploit those who are not and have not.

Verses 20, 22 and 23 are all about the injustice committed against God's sacred design of marriage and family relationship.

Verse 21: "*Cursed is anyone who has sexual relations with any animal.*" That is an unjust act toward humanity itself, because it diminishes us, whom God created in His image, to the level of mere animals.

Let me say, as detestable as this sounds, our culture is steadily edging closer and closer to it as we, more and more in our estimations, see and accept pets as people, and as we diminish God's idea of what sexual relations are to be.

Of course, not only do all these sexual sins refer back to the seventh commandment, they all also speak directly to the temptations that would certainly exist for the Israelites to become like their Canaanite neighbors in their worship of the fertility gods.

For a people who are to be, in effect, married to Yahweh, you see, engaging in these sorts of things would not only be unjust acts against themselves and their partners, but they would also be grave injustices against God's Lordship, covenant and purity.

Verses 24 and 25: "*Cursed is anyone who kills their neighbor secretly,*" and, "*anyone who accepts a bribe to kill an innocent person.*"

This is not killing as in war. This is killing as in planned, premeditated, undeserved murder—certainly an injustice to the victim, but just as much, an injustice committed against a civilized society—which, it goes without saying, cannot last long if murder goes unchecked. This is the sixth commandment.

In all these ways and certainly others, Christ-followers, because we walk in relationship with God, are *for justice*.

And just as Moses set up this ceremony – the strongest vehicle Moses had for emphasizing these reminders to Israel of the importance of God’s people doing justly – let me say, so must we find ways to remind ourselves of how important it is to God *that we do justly*.

Followers of Jesus speak to our world of His mercy and grace, certainly.

We absolutely speak of His power to pardon and forgive sins and of His great, great love.

But along with these, we have to tell the rest – we have to tell the whole truth.

We have to let others know, even while reminding ourselves, of the tragic outcomes of moral and spiritual defiance against God and His way.

To follow Jesus not only means *not to commit* these injustices *ourselves*; to follow Jesus also means *not to ignore: not to stand by and do nothing* as others around us commit them.

Just as *Jesus was the salt, so now we are the salt that seasons our society with just behavior*.

As *Jesus was the light, so now His body is the light* of the world – a light that shows a dark culture God’s best ways.

We are the *leaven: the yeast* that Jesus describes in Matthew and Luke that works justice into our world, and in doing so reveals the good way of God’s kingdom (Matthew 13:33; Luke 13:20–21).

You see, Moses’ nation of Israel was to be these things, but they were unable.

We who follow Christ though and in the power of God’s Spirit, we are able – we will be enabled – if only *we will*.

In Christ, being *for justice* is being *for God’s justice*.

Differentiate it thoughtfully from what the world proclaims as justice, but embrace the justice of God and our responsibility to stand and fight for it.

I mean, if the world ever needed to see God’s people do justly – isn’t it now? Isn’t it now?

In the last few months, our Bishops have articulated five principles for which the Free Methodist church stands, and the second of the five talks about this: “love-driven justice.”

They put it like this: “We devote ourselves to our founders’ deep convictions around matters of injustice as they took their stand against the evils of slavery, the oppression of the poor, the marginalization of women, and the abuse of power in the church. Our heart for justice continues and expands today, fueled by God’s holy love for the unborn, the vulnerable, the oppressed, the marginalized, and people of all races and ethnicities.

We do this not only to realize a better society, but so that all might be reconciled to God and to one another in ways that reflect God’s just character.”

Followers of Jesus are for that justice based in God’s person and character.

Do you stand for that? Are you for justice?

I know our society has convoluted and even redefined, in ways, the meaning of the word, but we have to get past that. We cannot just avoid, ignore or dispose of justice. We have to take it back and stand for it: justice, God’s justice, real justice for all, because it’s who God is, and it is who God wants us to be.

Prayer

Closing Song: *Here I Am, Lord*

Benediction:

Let us embrace justice, and live such that we show the world the justice of God, such that the Church of Jesus Christ – all around the world and right here in our midst – might truly be a place where justice, God’s justice, flows like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream (Amos 5:24). For our good, for the good of our neighbors, for the good of our world, and for the glory of God.