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Romans 12:9-21

12th Message

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LET JUSTICE ROLL DOWN

SERIES: OVERCOMING WITH GOOD

One month ago the country marked the fiftieth anniversary of the March on Washington and Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech, calling for an end to racism. King addressed the question, "When will you be satisfied?" and answered, "[W]e are not satisfied and will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream." Such was the dream of the prophets, for here King was quoting from Amos, words which we heard in our Scripture reading (Amos 5:14-15, 18-24), and again in Sandra McCracken's song, "Justice Will Roll Down," sung as our offertory.¹ Amos 2700 years ago, Martin Luther King fifty years ago, Sandra McCracken three years ago: these and many others have raised their voices calling for social justice.

Our Scripture reading began,

**Seek good, and not evil,
that you may live;
and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you,
as you have said.**

**Hate evil, and love good,
and establish justice in the gate;
it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts,
will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph. (Amos 5:14-15 ESV)**

You may recognize these words for Paul echoes them in Romans 12, and we have read them repeatedly over the past three months in our series on this chapter entitled, "Overcoming with Good." The second half of this chapter is bracketed by the call to hate evil and love good, to overcome evil with good:

Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. (12:9)

Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable [good] in the sight of all. (12:17)

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (12:21)

Though Paul does not use the language of justice in this chapter, many Christians who have read the chapter pursue its call to overcome evil with good into the realm of social justice. I therefore thought it appropriate that we end this series with a sermon on this topic. This will not prove popular to all Christians. Many conservative evangelicals are wary of social justice; I know that some of you are. Three years ago Glenn Beck spoke out against social justice:

"I beg you, look for the words 'social justice' or 'economic justice' on your church Web site. If you find it, run as fast as you can. Social justice and economic justice, they are code words. Now, am I advising people to leave their church? Yes!"²

So I give you fair warning! If you feel the need to run for the doors, now is the time! On the other hand, the high school group is here this morning specifically to hear this message.

What is social justice? At its most basic level it is about ensuring the basic human rights and recognizing the dignity of all members of society, especially those who are disadvantaged and vulnerable. But,

since it has become such a popular term and so many people and organizations have taken up the banner of social justice, it can mean almost anything you want it to mean. It has become a slippery term. Some view social justice as the creation of an egalitarian society in which wealth is redistributed by the government. Hence the assertion by Beck and others that it is a code word for communism or big government.

Today we associate "social justice" with liberal, left-wing causes, but for a long time the concept was the preserve of Christian groups, and particularly the Catholic church. It was within Catholic circles that the term was first used in 1840. But the idea is firmly rooted in the Old Testament, where it is most frequently referred to with the word pair "righteousness and justice." We have already seen this pair in Amos:

**But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (Amos 5:24)**

What do these two words mean? We tend to think of justice as legal proceedings, and righteousness as our standing before God. But especially when used as a pair, these words concern the functioning of society. Justice refers to both the "restoration of community order" and the "constant preservation" of that order as expressed in *shalom*,³ where *shalom* is best understood not just as peace but as wholeness, well-being and flourishing. "Righteousness relates to wholeness in relationships at every level of community and is measured by the well-being of all parties.... Justice and righteousness describe persons and behaviors that seek wholeness and well-being for all, that seek equity in all social interrelationships, and that do not seek advantage at the expense of another's disadvantage."⁴ Thus a society in which there is justice and righteousness is a flourishing society in which all the component groups are participating in that flourishing. Bruce Waltke writes that "the righteous...are willing to disadvantage themselves to advantage the community; the wicked are willing to disadvantage the community to advantage themselves."⁵

So, "righteousness and justice" is all about ensuring the flourishing life of the whole community. This understanding of righteousness is reflected in the long-standing use in the Jewish community of the word *tzedakah*, the Hebrew word for "righteousness," as the term for charity. *Tzedakah* is an obligation: those with resources are obligated to provide for the poor within the community, but it is also seen as a privilege. This is "righteousness," right behavior within community.

The Biblical concept of social justice is rooted in two fundamental principles: the character of God and the dignity of humanity. Justice and righteousness are rooted in God's character, celebrated frequently by the psalmist. In the last verse of our call to worship we read, "He loves righteousness and justice" (Ps 33:5), or we might translate it, "He loves social justice." "Righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne" (Ps 97:2; cf. 89:14). He is "Father of the fatherless and protector of widows" (Ps 68:5). God cares for the weak, the vulnerable and the oppressed. This stands in marked contrast to the gods of the surrounding cultures; they favored the privileged elite: the king and the priests.

Secondly, the Bible affirms the dignity of all people, which is fundamental to the concept of social justice. All are made in the image of God (Gen 1:26-27). No matter how much that image is marred, there is still a core dignity to every human being. Again this is in marked contrast to the ideas of the surrounding cultures in which it was only the king who was in God's image. The concept of human rights is based on the understanding of the value of every human being. It derives from Genesis 1, not from the Enlightenment, not from human rationality.

God made humanity in his image. But subsequent chapters of Genesis show the rapid deterioration of humanity into social oppression, into "might is right." We see this in Cain's murder of his brother Abel, in Lamech's escalation of violence, in universal wickedness in the days of Noah, and in human autonomy at the Tower of Babel. Then God stepped in and said, "Enough!" He called Abraham to be the founder of a new flourishing humanity. It was against the backdrop of the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah that God said concerning Abraham:

I have chosen him, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice. (Gen 18:19)

Abraham and his family were to be an alternative society, living life a different way from that which prevailed in surrounding cultures; they were to be a society characterized by social justice. Centuries later God delivered his people from bitter oppression and harsh servitude in Egypt where they had suffered great social injustice. He entered into covenant with Israel to be his people, a people characterized by social justice. This would be best expressed in how they treated the vulnerable in their midst. Particularly vulnerable were the foreigner, the widow and the fatherless, frequently mentioned as a trio of the disadvantaged. The law provided multiple mechanisms for their care. The tithes provided for those who had no provision of their own, primarily the Levites, but also the poor and vulnerable. The tithes facilitated the participation of the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow in the life of the community. A second mechanism was gleaning: the margins and corners of fields were to be left unharvested so that the poor could glean. The poor were provided not only with their food, but also with the dignity of working for their food. A third mechanism was the Sabbath year: every seventh year the clock was reset with a release of slaves and debt. We might wonder why there even was slavery within Israel. This slavery was not the same as that under the Roman Empire or that of African-Americans, both of which relied upon the kidnapping of people in one form or another, for which the Torah specified a harsh penalty. It was more akin to indentured service; Israelites who fell into debt sold themselves into slavery, to serve another, in order to pay off their debts. A fourth mechanism was the year of Jubilee: every fiftieth year, in a more comprehensive reset, all land reverted to its original owners, to the tribe to which it had been allocated as an inheritance. Again it was because of need, because of poverty and indebtedness that people sold their land.

These four mechanisms enabled the poor and vulnerable to participate in community life. The Law called Israelites not to oppress or wrong the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow (Exod 22:21-21), nor to pervert their justice (Deut 24:17). The call to love the foreigner was predicated on the memory that the Israelites had once been foreigners in Egypt.

Any society has people who are vulnerable. Israel would have been no exception. Widows and fatherless children were a fact of life. God provided not by eliminating the death of fathers and husbands but by commanding his people to care for the people rendered vulnerable by

such death. Israel would always have the stranger, the fatherless and the widow among them. Later texts added other categories of vulnerable people: the poor, the needy and the oppressed. In what seems like a contradiction the Lord told Israel,

But there will be no poor among you...For there will never cease to be poor in the land. (Deut 15:4, 11)

There always would be the poor, but the Israelites were to care for them so they didn't remain poor. It is as if the Lord allowed the presence of the poor and vulnerable in order to test Israel. God cared how the Israelites behaved, not only individually, but especially corporately, as a community. He called Israel to a life of ethical monotheism. Monotheism: the belief in one God and loyalty to him alone. Ethical: loyalty to this one God affected every aspect of one's behavior.

As Israel developed, the one charged with leading the people in social justice was the king. David was the paradigm. After consolidating his rule over the whole kingdom, he "administered justice and equity [righteousness] to all his people" (2 Sam 8:15; 1 Chr 8:14). Solomon followed in his father's footsteps. His wisdom was tested by a difficult case early in his reign, that of the two prostitutes disputing over a baby. Solomon so masterfully decided this case that "all Israel heard of the judgment that the king had rendered, and they stood in awe of the king, because they perceived that the wisdom of God was in him to do justice" (1 Kgs 3:28). The Queen of Sheba famously visited Solomon in Jerusalem. At the end of her visit she praised God for putting Solomon on Israel's throne: "he has made you king, that you may execute justice and righteousness" (1 Kgs 10:9; cf. 2 Chr 9:8).

But sadly it was under Solomon that injustice took root in Israel. Under subsequent kings social justice among God's people deteriorated. Sadly, as went the king so went the people, for good or, more usually, for ill. A notable example of social injustice is Ahab's seizure of Naboth's vineyard, which involved killing Naboth on trumped-up charges brought by two scoundrels (1 Kgs 21).

As injustice grew within Israel and Judah God sent prophets to confront the leaders with their behavior. God was just as concerned about social injustice as he was about idolatry. These prophets did not mince their words; they lambasted the leaders using gruesome imagery. Among the most vivid is this from Micah:

**Hear, you heads of Jacob
and rulers of the house of Israel!
Is it not for you to know justice?—
you who hate the good and love the evil,
who tear the skin from off my people
and their flesh from off their bones,
who eat the flesh of my people,
and flay their skin from off them,
and break their bones in pieces
and chop them up like meat in a pot,
like flesh in a cauldron. (Mic 3:1-3)**

And yet Israel continued its religious activities. Isaiah, Amos, Micah and other prophets all decried these religious activities and meaningless worship since they were not accompanied by justice and righteousness. We saw this in our reading from Amos: "I hate, I despise your feasts" (5:21).

It is abundantly clear that social justice was an important aspect of life for God's people, and that social injustice was a major cause for God's judgment on his people. God finally judged his people for three reasons, three sets of sins. The one we most commonly think of is their religious sin, their idolatry: forsaking the Lord and pursuing other gods. Secondly was their political sin: relying on foreign powers rather

than on God for their protection or deliverance. Thirdly, and just as importantly, was their social sin, their social injustice.

This failure of Israel's leadership to exercise social justice generated a longing for a future king who would do so, a Messiah who would rule in righteousness and justice. For example in this well known text:

**For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given;
and the government shall be upon his shoulder...
Of the increase of his government and of peace
there will be no end,
on the throne of David and over his kingdom,
to establish it and to uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time forth and forevermore. (Isa 9:6-7)**

These are but a few of the many examples I could cite of the importance of social justice for Old Testament Israel.

Turning to the Gospels we find that Jesus shared this concern for social justice. He announced such at the beginning of his ministry, in the synagogue at Nazareth, reading from Isaiah:

**The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (Luke 4:18-19, quoting
Isa 61:1-2)**

Then he said, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Jesus showed compassion to the poor, the weak, the vulnerable. This is an aspect of his ministry that Luke was particularly interested in. Just like the Old Testament prophets, Jesus criticized the scribes and Pharisees for being very religious but ignoring social justice. He accused them of devouring widows' houses (Mark 12:40; Luke 20:47). They gave money to God but didn't care for their parents, "thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down" (Mark 7:9-13). They tithed their mint, dill and cumin, but neglected justice and the love of God (Matt 23:23; Luke 11:42). Therefore all their religious observances were meaningless in God's eyes.

In the parable of the sheep and the goats, Jesus commended those who cared for the vulnerable in his name:

"I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me... Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me." (Matt 25:35-36, 40)

So we see that social justice was just as important for Jesus as it had been for the Old Testament prophets, and as it was in the Torah, Israel's law. These three sources are frequently cited as the justification for social justice today, for the church and individual Christians to be involved in social causes, in helping the weak and the vulnerable in society. All of these texts were addressed to Israel. Even Jesus was addressing the Jews and conducted his social ministry among Jewish society. But we are not Israel. How do we responsibly apply these texts to our current age?

God called Israel to a life of justice and righteousness within the covenant community, within the people of God. The covenant community today is the church. So the immediate parallel to the Old Tes-

tament call to social justice is to care for the vulnerable within the church. The early church started doing so right from the beginning:

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship (*koinōnia*), to the breaking of bread and the prayers... And all who believed were together and had all things in common (*koinos*). And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. (Acts 2:42, 44-45)

The early church was a fellowship, a *koinōnia*. This doesn't mean that they stood around and drank coffee as you will do after the service. Fellowship, *koinōnia*, means a close participation in one another's lives, having things in common (*koinos*). In this early fellowship needs were met from within. Widows were cared for through a daily provision (Acts 6). It was to oversee the logistics of this care for widows that deacons were first appointed. A generation later Paul instructed Timothy that widows over sixty could be enrolled (1 Tim 5:9), evidently in a register of those provided for out of church funds.

Another aspect of care was relief sent to those in need. When the prophet Agabus from Jerusalem prophesied before the Antioch church that there would be great famine, the disciples in Antioch "determined, everyone according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea." They sent Barnabas and Paul as their representatives to take this collection to the elders in Jerusalem (Acts 11:27-30). Later Paul gathered a collection from numerous Gentile churches for the relief of the Jewish believers in Judea (2 Cor 8-9). As we saw a few weeks ago, he called this collection a *charis*, "grace" and a *koinōnia*, "participation." These are examples of charity and social justice within the church. This would have had a powerful impact on the first-century world for it was radically different from the behavior of Roman society.

So, the church's first responsibility is that it cares for its own. Since the church cuts across all lines of class, wealth, position, there will inevitably be needy and vulnerable people within the church. For us, our deacons continue to do a great job helping those in need. They are enabled to do so by the need fund to which you so generously contribute. This is charity, but it's also a form of social justice, enabling the flourishing participation of the vulnerable in our church community.

But since early on the church and individual Christians have sought to extend care to the weak, needy and vulnerable beyond the Christian community. History is full of the charitable deeds of the church. The early church during the Roman Empire practiced charity beyond its community. It cared for people during plagues that swept the empire. It rescued abandoned baby girls from the trash heaps. When Julian the Apostate sought to create a pagan philanthropy akin to Christian philanthropy he found he couldn't. Pagans had no interest in caring for the weak; it was only the Christians who did so. Throughout much of the so-called Dark Age, as civilization collapsed in western Europe, and during the Middle Ages, it was the monasteries, and later the convents also, which extended care to the surrounding communities. Throughout the centuries Christians have established schools, orphanages, hospitals, almshouses for the poor, and many other institutions.

Two months ago when we started looking at the call to overcome evil with good I asked, "Are Christians good for society?" The testimony of history is that Christians have brought much benefit to society. But the church has also been guilty of abuses, especially when it has accumulated power and wealth. The medieval church became fabulously wealthy on the backs of the poor. Indulgences were sold to those who could ill-afford the money. In its worst moments the church has been as guilty as was Old Testament Israel. And just as for Israel, injustice within the church has generally arisen from having too much power.

In its better moments the church has been charitable, and Christians have given generously to those in need, both fellow Christians and non-Christians. But social justice goes beyond charity. Social justice seeks to redress injustices that abound in the world. Here is where the concept gets controversial for Christians. Social justice has proven polarizing. On one side are liberal, left-leaning advocates of social justice, including more liberal evangelicals. They tend to see a larger role for government with a more aggressive intervention in society. But, especially among non-Christians, there is naiveté about sin, and an overconfidence in ability to transform behavior. This makes many conservative Christians uneasy.

On the other side are fundamentalists and conservatives who tend to stress personal salvation. The needy can be helped by personal charity, but one should be careful not to detract from the real mission of Christians and the church which is to preach the gospel and get people saved. Furthermore, the world is headed for destruction, so we shouldn't care too much about the world anyway. Social injustice is blamed on the breakdown of families, so the solution is to get Christians into political office to enact laws to prevent this, and then come down hard on those who break the laws, exercising retributive justice.

Amidst this polarization there has been an increasing interest in social justice within the evangelical mainstream over the past two or three decades. A role model for many is William Wilberforce. In 2007 Wilberforce received renewed attention on the occasion of the two-hundredth anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade in Britain. Wilberforce was born into the nouveau riche; his father had made a fortune in trade. With too much money for his own good, Wilberforce was an indolent student. At 21 he won election to parliament by outspending his rivals, and embarked on a career as a self-seeking politician. But at the age of 25 he was converted and became a changed man. He sought the counsel of John Newton, the converted slave trader, who encouraged him to stay in politics and use his position for good. He introduced into parliament a bill for the abolition of the slave trade. Both he and the bill were met with ridicule. Eleven times the bill was defeated, but Wilberforce persevered. After twenty years the bill was finally passed in 1807. Thus the slave trade was abolished. Wilberforce pressed on, introducing a bill to abolish slavery itself. Twenty-six years later a bill to this effect finally passed the Commons three days before he died in 1833. Wilberforce used his wealth and position to promote the welfare of those without wealth and position. The fight against slavery was just one of many causes that Wilberforce engaged in, together with a group of Christian friends whom we now know as the Clapham Sect.

Slavery has been abolished, but, sadly, slavery is abundant in the world today. One of its most pernicious forms is human trafficking for sexual slavery. One Christian organization fighting this today is the International Justice Mission (IJM), "a human rights agency that brings rescue to victims of slavery, sexual exploitation and other forms of violent oppression." It was founded in 1997 by Gary Haugen, who still serves as its CEO. He was a lawyer at the US Department of Justice, investigating police misconduct, and served as the UN chief investigator in the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide. IJM got its start like many other Christian organizations promoting social justice: Gary saw injustice, was moved to compassion, realized he had expertise and position to do something about it, and acted. He pulled together a team of lawyers, human rights professionals and public officials to use their knowledge, expertise and position to move beyond

charity to seek to confront abuse and rescue its victims. On Thursday, October 17, PBCC will host a dinner with Gary Haugen, so you can learn more about IJM.

In talking about social justice people often distinguish between the deserving poor and the undeserving poor. It's acceptable to help the deserving poor, but the undeserving poor don't deserve our help and any such help is wasted on them. But Christians have reached beyond the deserving poor to the undeserving poor. A great example of this is CityTeam. On Friday night PBCC hosted a graduation ceremony for fourteen people who had completed the year-long addiction recovery program. This auditorium was filled with more than 300 people who, it's fair to say, would not normally be in here. Here's a great example of a Christian organization that goes beyond charity. Charity would be to hand a dollar or two to someone on the street, knowing that the recipient would likely misuse it. Social justice seeks to restore wholeness and flourishing, to rebuild lives shattered by their own poor choices. It was moving to see mothers, fathers, sisters present certificates to family members, acknowledging how much pain the addict had caused the family, but rejoicing in restored relationships. One graduand asked that her certificate be presented by the judge before whom she had appeared in drug court!

In talking about social justice it is easy to feel guilty and overwhelmed, to feel that the need is so great that it is beyond anything we can do. How are we to practice this? And why should we as Christians care? We are called to overcome evil with good. At the head of the passage in Romans 12 is the exhortation, "Let love be genuine" (9). Under this heading follows a list of thirty imperatives, concluding, "Overcome evil with good" (21). The great resource that we have as Christians is *agapē* love, self-giving love that gives to help others. Glenn Beck was fearful that social justice meant that the government would take from him. But Biblical social justice is not about taking; it's about giving, freely and sacrificially, from hearts filled with *agapē* love.

At the head of the chapter is the call to transformed lifestyles, which is the only way we can live like this. We start with the mercies of God who reached out to us when we were undeserving. He lavished his love on us and has restored us. We now present ourselves as living sacrifices, available to be his instruments in the world. We no longer conform ourselves to this world, which looks out for its own selfish desires and fears others taking. Instead we are transformed by the renewing of our minds so that we might embrace the will of God. We can then reach out to others as God's instruments of blessing to the world, overcoming evil with good. May God give us the grace to each play our part in this ministry.

1. Sandra McCracken, "Justice will Roll Down," track 4, *In Feast or Fallow* (2010).
2. Tobin Grant, "Glenn Beck: 'Leave Your Church,'" *Christianity Today* March 12, 2010.
3. G. Liedke, "טפֿשׁ שְׁפֵט to judge," *TLOT* 1394.
4. Bruce C. Birch, "Justice," *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics* (ed. Joel B. Green; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 435.
5. Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book Proverbs: Chapters 1–15* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 97.

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