

Songs for the Soul - Justice Teaching & Scripture

Pastor Michael Stadtmueller: [00:00:00] So we're talking about justice today. And justice, by the way, when we are making these categories of Psalms, is not traditionally recognized as one of the buckets, so to speak, like the other five we've shared. In fact, there's another bucket that is often listed, and it is called royal Psalms. So some would say the, the neater bucket might be called royal Psalms.

Uh, but the reason I didn't wanna do that is justice shouldn't be taken out just because it exists across the board. J- royal Psalms have justice, and I think they wouldn't be here if it wasn't for justice. So I wanted to just lift that up, and you might kinda put royal Psalms. But why not just royal Psalms, I say?

Well, when we pray for our leaders in church, you may catch that, that almost every week, unless Tim, myself, or Nancy are cutting a prayer, which sounds horrible, but sometimes for time we're just looking and saying, "Well, we do that prayer every week." We have a list of [00:01:00] prayers that we're always doing, and one of them is always for the leaders, not in the church itself, but leaders in the world, right?

We pray for the world, for world leaders, that they might bring justice, that they might seek justice. So you'll hear that regularly in church, and that's very in line with the royal Psalms.

So when you had a Psalm that was connected to royalty, a king, probably something that would come out perhaps when the next king would be brought in, maybe another great, uh, composer, so to speak, of their day. I know it's different in that day.

Uh, these justice Psalms were of this royal style, and they always... Or the, the royal, the royal Psalms were of, of a special style, but within them was always just justice, justice, justice. So because the writers of the Psalms, though, did not see justice as a political issue or an abstract ideal, that they understood justice as part of God's [00:02:00] very character, this is just across the board in there whenever we're talking or speaking to God.

In fact, I would say to worship the God of Israel was to worship the one who defends the vulnerable, who confronts oppression, and continually works to

restore creation. So it makes sense that it's everywhere, that justice is in all of the Psalms or almost in all of the Psalms.

Or if you can't find it easily, if you start talking about it, I think you'd say, "Yeah, it's there. It's there." Maybe not the word justice, but it's the defending of the vulnerable. It's the crying out of the people who need that support.

So let's go through them real fast. The different buckets that we had all these other weeks of, of Psalms. Justice, how do they appear? Justice appears in every kind.

Songs of praise celebrate God's just reign. Lament Psalms are crying out because justice has been violated. Thanksgiving Psalms [00:03:00] rejoice when God restores what has been broken.

Trust Psalms carry the quiet confidence that God's faithful care will ultimately overcome injustice that we feel like we cannot yet change. Remember what I used for trust was the hand, like the parent saying, "I gotcha. We're gonna make it through this." That's the trust Psalm. Trust that in the midst of injustice, we're gonna find a way. Um, and when we don't, we lament, back to that side of justice.

Wisdom Psalms teach the kind of life that reflects God's justice, and so that was last week. So all of them have justice in it, and then this Royal Psalms section is the only other one. I just... Maybe I, maybe I should have had a Royal Psalms alone, but I, I wanted to do it this way.

So let's go ahead and understand justice within the Psalms. Uh, two Hebrew [00:04:00] words help us understand what the Psalms mean when they speak about justice. We gotta remind ourselves that whenever you're, you're going 2,000 years, it's not the word justice that they use, so we're doing our best to have the word that they put with justice.

And in fact, the closest translated word is mishpat. Um, it's usually translated specifically as justice. But I, I, I would argue that it's a much broader than our modern idea, especially if you're making justice about courts or legal decisions. It's, it's that broader sense of justice. Because it's connected with God. It's not just connected with the courts.

So mishpat literally describes restoring what has become wrong. If you think about that, that's a really interesting thing. A distortion of what God intended, mishpat would be the restoration of that. That is justice. So it includes

protecting those without power, defending the vulnerable, [00:05:00] correcting injustice, and ensuring that people receive what God intends for them. So mishpat is the active work of putting life back into proper order.

Uh, easier said than done. Let's, let's acknowledge- ... that's, that's a big hand, right? Uh, yeah, so we'll just have everything put back into order, like when you drop a dish and you try to put that back in order. Good luck. Uh, but when the Psalms pray for justice, they are asking God to restore the whole towards its intended wholeness.

That brings up the second word. There's one other word that is usually translated in our words as righteousness. And so righteousness, uh, is also different from today's definition.

Today, we frequently think of righteousness as sort of a personal morality, uh, or a private goodness. Uh, it's interesting, I know some people almost have a negative view of the word righteousness because so often they put it with [00:06:00] self-righteousness, right? But if we think of it just as, as a good word in general, I think that's where we take it as, you know, and when we see it in scripture, "He declared it to him as righteousness."

So in the Old Testament, righteousness is primarily relational. A righteous king governs fairly. A righteous neighbor treats others faithfully. A righteous community honors its covenant with God and one another. And you'll see that over and over again, where that's where the word tzedakah comes up.

And something, you know, opposite of that can also come up when a, a place is unrighteous, when they are anti-tzedakah, so to speak. I'm giving you not the Hebrew word, but the anti.

Uh, so justice and mishpat, and righteousness, tzedakah, that were both bigger than our modern words, but that gives us a, a good lane to kind of walk in for this. They [00:07:00] frequently appear together because they describe life as God desires it. You have those two words, of justice and righteousness, how you live your life within what God is calling to the order.

You can also see how, uh, this goes with each of the categories that we have talked about for the last six weeks, but especially with the last one, as it speaks to an alignment of sorts. Uh, let me, let me just give you that.

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

justice are the foundation of your throne, steadfast love and faithfulness go before you."

So where do we take this? Uh, how does this become something that's so much in worship? Well, I would argue that worship and justice, they really do belong together.

Sometimes in our day and age, [00:08:00] people make justice a political thing, and we have to be careful about that because it's all through scripture, and especially in the Psalms, that were never not in worship. Psalms were always in worship. So the Psalms never separate worship from justice.

Israel did not simply gather to express private faith or a personal devotion. That is really a 20- 21st, 20th century, uh, creation, and mostly American, where we turn things into a personal faith. It's always been a communal faith.

They gathered to remember who truly reigns. So even when they talked about something to honor the king because it was a faith-filled, you know, country that, that they, they had that, they would go to God's justice and pray that that leader would follow God's justice.

And let me tell you, most of the time they did not. So we can just remind ourselves that that's always been a struggle for them, too.

Worship continually reminded Israel that God's kingdom operates [00:09:00] differently from every human kingdom. And so that meant that yes, indeed, that was the problem with, with a king, uh, that would be leading the people. Ultimately, you had to have royalty beyond that which is earthly.

Psalms, though they do not se- allow us to separate loving God from caring about the world God loves, and maybe that's the most important key to see. You cannot love God and forget about the rest of this world. That's not in line with mishpat and tzedakah. It's not possible.

So when Jesus announced good news to the poor, welcomed outsiders, healed the sick, and forgave sinners, he was challenging religious hypocrisy and making our faith about bringing justice to the world, while others, the Pharisees and the Sadducees...

And by the way, there were some really good Pharisees and Sadducees. I know there was. This is another 50 years [00:10:00] later when they're really fighting, when some of the stuff gets written down.

But it was trying to expose the hypocrisy that we sometimes see in church. Not, not, not pointing at here, but in church in general, that, that, that piece of, "Well, we got it together, and if you just do what we're doing, you'll see." And you look and say, "I'm not sure that that's everything right there." It's kind of a, a dangerous road, right?

God's reign always moves towards restoration, reconciliation, and abundant life, and those three things involve not individuals, but community. Restoration of community. Reconciliation, that can't be just an individual journey. That must be in community. An abundant life, well, abundant life as a personal faith is not abundant. It, it happens when it's interaction, when it's, when it's in community with one another.

One more piece I just wanna lift up before we [00:11:00] read the scripture, because I thought it was kinda cool. Luther, this is kind of a broader sense, but I, I stumbled upon it because of the justice category.

Martin Luther loved the Psalms, named the Psalms as one of his favorite books. I should've brought this up in an earlier week. He said his favorite book in the whole Old Testament, he called them their own little Bible, because they contain the whole story of God's relationship with humanity, all the feelings, all the stuff in song.

More importantly, Luther believed the Psalms taught Christians how to pray. I really like that, to think about that. You know, if you think about going through the Psalms, all those different things that are prayed are, are prayers.

And is there one of those weeks where we did it and said, "I never pray like that"? I mean, I'm not talking about the verse, but the, the act of lament or the act of praise. Maybe there's one that you don't feel as comfortable [00:12:00] in, and these were showing people that this is connected to the people of God in every time and place. And indeed, what a gift to have something that goes generation upon generation.

Luther says they give us words when we have none. I love that. So they give justice to the weak. They defend the cause of the poor. "The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down."

The other thing about reading those Psalms, we are reminded of that when we lose our own centering, and sometimes we do.

Okay. Wow, I'm in good shape, so I get to share my analogy here, too.

One other thing with the Psalms that I wanted to share with you. I don't know if you'll ever get a chance or if you have had a chance to go to the Holy Land, and I know right now that would be a hard trip.

Um, but if you ever get there, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, in one sense, I didn't love it because it doesn't look like what I think of faithful. It has a very Eastern sensibility that just [00:13:00] doesn't, doesn't come to the centering of my own faith. That's not its problem, that's mine. But it's true that I didn't have that spiritual peace, uh, in that.

But the place that I did is when you stood in line to go to the internal Holy Sepulcher, which was another little church within the church, and they only let in like six people at a time, and you can touch the stone supposedly right where Jesus was crucified.

You and I both know it's really hard to know for sure, right? I mean, this is old. It's, it's, it's actually kind of amazing. This can be traced back to somewhere around the year three or four hundred, which is pretty close.

And the reason that sometime they lost it a little bit within there too is because whenever a conqueror came in, you know where they'd start? The most holy of holy places.

But you know how you could also win y- the, the Christian forces or Christian groups would be able [00:14:00] to repopulate the land if they lost it? They would look smack dab where the biggest other thing was placed on their own holy sites, and they knew that it was there.

And so the word is believed to have stayed, and has stayed in that one place for what can be traced, like I said, somewhere back to right around four hundred.

Anyways, the reason I'm sharing this story is you get to touch this stone that is smooth. Why is it smooth? Thousand years of people touching that stone because they believe it's holy.

I think the Psalms offer us something like that. That even if you aren't quite sure of how you can see the holiness in a, a particular Psalm, maybe the words aren't speaking to you, knowing that Martin Luther, Saint Anselm, find a saint in the past, Mother Mary, or Mother Teresa, every [00:15:00] pope has spoken all of these Psalms and connected with them in some manner, and so are you.

There's a, a piece of crossing time that makes these holy, even if you're struggling to find the complete breadth of the holiness. There's something connected in the ritual of being connected with others. And I think that's in the Psalms too, and I just wanted to lift that up.

Okay. Today we're gonna read Psalm 72.

And a reminder that afterwards you're gonna have some small group discussions. I'm gonna give you seven minutes for only three questions, so it's not that hard. But I remember the first question is: what are you hearing?

After this, you can talk to me. We can have a little time together. Where did your spirit connect in this Psalm? What is, what, what are you hearing? So we'll do that, but let's just hear the Psalm first.

I'm gonna read it out loud. You're welcome to turn to Psalm 72. You're also welcome to close your eyes and listen. Do whatever makes the most sense for you and your [00:16:00] spiritual, um, connection with this

"Prayer for guidance and support for the king of Solomon.

"Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a king's son. May he judge your people with righteousness and your poor with justice. May the mountains yield prosperity for the people and the hills in righteousness. May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor.

"May he live while the sun endures, as long as the moon throughout all generations. May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass, like showers that water the earth. In his days may righteousness flourish and peace abound until the moon is no more. [00:17:00]

"May he have dominion from sea to sea, and from the river to the ends of the earth. May his foes bow down before him, his enemies lick the dust. May the king of Tarshish and of the Isles render him tribute. May the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts. May all kings fall down before him, all nations give him service.

"For he delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper. He has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy. From oppression and violence he redeems their life, and precious is their blood in his sight.

"Long may he live. May gold of Sheba give, be given to him. May prayer be made for him continually, and blessings invoked for him all day long. May there be abundance of grain in the land, and may it wave on the tops of the mountains. May its fruit be like Lebanon, [00:18:00] and may people blossom in the cities like the grass of the field. May his name endure forever, his fame continue as long as the sun. May all nations be blessed in him. May they pronounce him happy.

"Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who alone does wondrous things. Blessed be his glorious name forever. May his glory fill the whole earth. Amen and amen.

"The prayers of David, son of Jesse, are ended."