Pastor David M. Choi

**Righting the Wrongs:**

**A Theology of Justice**

**Scripture:** Ecclesiastes 3:16-22

**Introduction:**

Well, we are in the midst of our Pointless series, where we are looking at the book of Ecclesiastes, and what the Preacher has to tell us about the meaning of life as we experience it under the sun. Along the way, we saw how the things we normally pursue in order to find meaning and happiness are actually quite empty and pointless. As the Preacher tells us, it is like chasing after the wind. Why? Because none of it lasts.

And throughout this series, we’ve been forced to take a good look at our own lives and the way we go about living it, and through Qoheleth what we ended up discovering was our own emptiness. That we are hollow shells, only pretending to live human lives that are full. And that the way we do this is either by pursuing one thing after the other, hoping that the next thing will be able to satisfy what the thing before couldn’t, or by living in the illusion, which we create for ourselves, that we are somehow in control.

Earlier this week, I was listening to a podcast by this guy, named Patrick Shyu. Patrick is a software engineer, who made millions upon millions by working for some of the leading tech giants, like Google, Facebook, and Apple. Many of his podcasts have been about his own success and how others can achieve the same. But in this particular episode, I was surprised, because what he ended up talking about was what it all meant. This is what he said:

Here I am. Existing. Looking at people and asking, ‘Am I happy? Is this happiness? What am I even doing here?’ There’s a sense of restlessness [and] emptiness. I’m making stupid little [podcasts] for stupid little people, reading stupid little comments… And the dream seems to be sleeping in all day, where you don’t have to get up, where you don’t have to go to work… where you can sit back and relax. And that’s pretty much what I have now. I can sleep in all day, and it doesn’t really matter whether or not I wake up. I have enough [money] to sustain myself… and yet there’s an emptiness to it. It doesn’t feel fulfilling.

He then goes on (to talk about life’s unpredictability):

The love in your marriage will start fading, your parents will start growing older, you’ll see your loved ones start passing away, your health will start to go… Quite likely, life will not go as planned. It rarely ever does. Whatever goals or dreams you’re chasing after, it probably doesn’t exist. That’s the funny thing about life… Stability is [only] an illusion created by society to protect us from the chaos of the universe… So, that’s why I think it’s important to enjoy the journey.

So, I’m listening to this, and I’m stunned, because this is exactly what the Preacher is saying (though I highly doubt Patrick has ever read the book of Ecclesiastes). None of it lasts, so find enjoyment in life. The only difference, of course, is that the Preacher understands that unless we enjoy life as *God’s* gift then this too is vanity, because apart from God even our enjoyment of things is empty (6:2). This is what we’ve looked at thus far.

And now, we move on to complicate things even further by thinking about the topic of retribution. That is, how do we deal with situations where people hurt us and get away with it? Who will carry out justice in a world where people constantly get away with injustice? You see, the Preacher observes another paradoxical and frustrating fact of life – as he’s been doing.

In life, we think good people are the ones who should be rewarded, when the reality is the ones who benefit the most are the ones who cheat, lie, and steal, and for them there hardly seems to be any sort of consequences. So, how do we live in a world where things are so backwards? To answer this, we first need to see more in depth how Qoheleth understands this problem, to then understand how he thinks the world addresses it. And only once we’ve considered these things can we understand what sort of justice is actually needed in order to make our lives ones that are livable in a world that does not reward what’s good.

**Problem of (In)Justice:**

If you skip ahead with me, and take a look at what the Preacher writes in 7:15, there he says, “In my vain life I have seen everything. There is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evildoing.” And if you go back to 4:1-3, there he says something similar, “I saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun. And behold, the tears of the oppressed, and they had no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power, and there was no one to comfort them. And I thought the dead who are already dead [are] more fortunate than the living who are still alive.”

Remember, the Preacher is trying to make sense of life on life’s own terms. The more he tries to understand it, though, the less sense it makes to him, because, in this case, it seems so contrary to our basic human intuitions that while the wicked prosper the good and the innocent suffer. Immediately, we think of Job in the Old Testament, known as the righteous sufferer, who committed no evil against God, and yet had everything taken away from him and suffered immensely. But we see this happening in our day as well, don’t we?

According to UNICEF, 1.2 million children are kidnapped and sold into sex slavery every year, a majority of those children being between the ages of 5 and 6. And while innocent children are being sold, raped, and left to die – either because they’ve been over-abused or because they’ve contracted sexually transmitted diseases – (what happens to their pimps?) their pimps go on to enjoy the bounteous profit of $32 billion dollars, which they make from human-trafficking. And of the thousands and thousands of pimps that are out there, since 2003, only 308 of these pimps, captors, and pedophiles have actually been prosecuted and much less have actually been convicted.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The reason I use the example of children is because, in this world, we can hardly imagine anything more innocent and more good than young children, which is why so many child-protection policies are in place, since they are the most vulnerable among those in society. But even so, they are the ones who continue to suffer the most, and they are the ones who will most likely never see any form of justice in their lifetime.

And it’s not just with sex-trafficking, but homelessness as well is an increasing problem among young children. In the United States alone, 1 in 30 kids are now homeless, and in some states it’s as staggering as 1 in 15. And there are a variety of reasons for that. For instance, forty-six percent of children ran away from home because they were being physically abused, and seventeen percent of them ran away because they were being forced into sexual activity by family or household members. And many more end up on the streets due to poor foster care systems.[[2]](#footnote-2) As a result, these children are deprived not only of shelter but also education, healthcare, and proper nutrition. And because of that, many of these kids will go on to develop acute psychological disorders like depression, anxiety, and PTSD.

The Preacher is looking out at his world, as clearly as we look out at ours, and he sees the tears of the oppressed with no one to comfort them. The innocent and the most vulnerable among us are used and exchanged as goods and commodities, to profit the rich and to shore up the powers of corrupt institutions and policy-makers. We see the tears of the oppressed, of poor young children and families, of five and six year old girls who will be sexually abused even as we sit here tonight, and we can only imagine how many will lay their heads tonight with no one to comfort them, with no one to love them. In a world like this, where there is no justice, what the Preacher then says makes total sense, doesn’t it? Better to be dead, or better yet to not be born at all, than to live in a world without justice, where this sort of stuff happens (4:2-3).

**The Limits of Justice:**

So, having made this poignant observation, the Preacher inevitably asks, “Where can we find justice?” In this life, under the sun, he sees that there are really only two options, both of which are unsatisfactory.

The first option is death. In v.19, it says, “For what happens to the children of man and what happens to the beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and man has no advantage over the beasts, for all is vanity. All go to one place. All are from dust, and to dust all [shall] return.” In other words, maybe there is some sense of justice in that, no matter how long they try to prolong their lives, the evil and the corrupt will all eventually die in the end. However, this doesn’t really make us feel a whole lot better, because what happens to bad people will also end up happening to good people. They, too, will end up in the ground: All are from dust, and to dust *all* return.

Adolf Hitler is one of the clearest forms of evil this world has ever seen or known. And with the victory of the Allies, along with the death of Hitler, the world rejoiced because it seemed to vindicate the triumph of good over evil. However, that feeling didn’t last very long. Because even after Hitler’s death, there was no undoing the injustice enacted by him. There was no undoing the death of six million Jews, and there was no undoing the deaths of hundreds of thousands of military soldiers and civilian people. Even with a victory and Hitler’s death, can we call this justice? Of course not. The death of one despot cannot restore all of the things that were now lost and ruined. And aside from that, how is it fair that, though someone like Hitler met their rightful end, we, too, people who aren’t nearly as bad, should meet the same end?

“Well, what about the afterlife?” Well, what about it? “Well, isn’t there justice there?” Who knows? Because when we simply look at life on this side of reality, who even knows if there is such a thing? Read v.21 again: “Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of beast goes down into the earth?” In other words, who knows whether or not good people really go to heaven and bad people go to hell? Apart from God, we cannot know that there is anything beyond death, and so, the Preacher is saying, in this life we can only be sure of one thing, namely, death. But as we’ve seen, this doesn’t really seem to be justice at all.

The second option then for justice, again, in this life, would be the courts of law. It seems obvious enough. If you wrong someone, or someone wrongs you, you take them to court, so that a judge can administer justice in the form of proper punishment, whether through legal fines, jail time, community service, and so forth. But this also doesn’t really sit well with the Preacher, and the reason for that is pretty straightforward: the courts of law get it wrong all the time. We see this in the staggering number of innocent people who are wrongfully convicted or executed every year.

But the Preacher actually uses stronger, and more cynical, language than the way I just put it. In v.16, “I saw under the sun that in the place of justice [i.e. courts], even there was *wickedness*, and in the place of righteousness, even there was wickedness.” So, check it out. Not only do courts mess up all the time simply due to ignorance or human errors, but oftentimes they don’t administer justice properly because there is something to be gained by it. People misuse the law and their positions of judicial power all the time for evil and selfish ends. Some of us think, if we are going to find any kind of justice here on this earth, then surely we can turn to our courts of law. But the Preacher is not fooled.

Let me give you an example of this. There’s a 1999 film, called *The Hurricane*, which is based on the true story of a man, named Rubin “The Hurricane” Carter. And in this film, Rubin, who’s played by Denzel Washington, is an African-American, middleweight boxing champion, who rises to fame and prominence during the time when America was racially segregated.

One night, in a bar in Paterson, New Jersey, three people were shot and killed, and, being racially motivated, the police framed Rubin for the murders, and was then given three consecutive life sentences. Throughout the movie, we see Rubin’s attempts to overturn his wrongful conviction by taking his case to court twice, but without any success both times. Near the end of the movie, he’s now already served twenty years in prison, but with the support of people who believe in his innocence he decides to take his case to court one more time, however, knowing that this is his last shot at getting out, because he appeals to the federal court. And I want to show you this clip, so you can hear and feel what he says. (*Show movie clips*.)

To spoil the ending, the judge rules that Rubin Carter’s conviction was, in fact, a constitutional violation, and that his prior rulings were not based on law nor evidence, but on racism and white prejudice. So, happy ending, right? Well, not exactly. Because while Rubin is freed in the end, justice would’ve been not wrongfully convicting an innocent person from the beginning – not twenty years later. And there are countless other stories like this, and though some get out what always pains me is to think about the years they’ve lost, the years of their life they’ll never get back. You see, even in our courts of law, justice is broken, and it’s never guaranteed.

**The Justice We Need:**

In things like this, we see the limits of justice, which is putting it mildly. That is, without God, these are the best forms of justice this world can offer: death or broken courts of law. And what the Preacher wants us to see is what he himself has seen: that trying to find justice for oneself or others in this life is also a chasing after the wind.

But obviously I am not saying we should, therefore, either give up or take justice into our own hands. Because what the bible tells us is that governments and courts are established by God, so we should obey them and we should look to them, but only to the degree they are functioning in their God-ordained capacities of administering impartial justice by treating all people with equal dignity and respect.[[3]](#footnote-3) However, as we’ve already seen, justice on this side of life will always be incomplete and partial because the truth of the matter is we live in a fallen world.

Nonetheless, we can’t shake this longing for perfect justice, because God has put into each of our hearts this deep-seated conviction that the good and the innocent should not suffer. Under the sun, the Preacher tells us there is no such thing, which is why striving for perfect justice is, in some sense, pointless, because who alone but God can know all things perfectly and give to each person the justice they’re due in a *perfect* manner? Only God. Hence, the Preacher says, “*God* will judge the righteous and the wicked…” (3:17).

And this is why we need the gospel, and this is why the gospel is such good news. In Christ, we now have what the Preacher has been searching for his whole life under the sun and under the covenant of Israel: a perfect judge. In the gospel of Luke (4:17-21), “Jesus attended the synagogue in Nazareth on a Sabbath and was invited to read from Scripture and to comment on what he read. ‘The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him,’ says Luke. ‘He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written’: *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor*.” Jesus then did what? He “rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.” Jesus then said, “today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

In Christ, God has judged the world perfectly by taking upon himself our guilt and our shame – the collective sin of humanity. And because of what God has done for us on the cross, we can leave vengeance into God’s hands and hope for perfect justice in Christ. For thus saith the Lord, “Vengeance is mine; I will repay” (Rom. 12:19). You see, no matter how robust our judicial systems may be or may become human beings will always be incapable of perfect justice; and so, God is saying let me do what only I can do. And pray that God would open you, and this world, up to the hope of Christ’s resurrection, which is the Spirit’s guarantee that God has judged the world, is now judging the world, and will one day perfectly complete his judgment upon the world when Christ returns.

In other words, the reason why we long for perfect justice is because God has put that longing in our souls. And the reason why we’re so often discouraged, why we struggle to hope for a world that is broken and messed up, is because we are looking for perfect justice in things that are not God. And the Preacher is saying once you realize you cannot obtain perfect justice in this world that is the precise moment when God opens you up to see the glory of his righteousness and the glory of his power.

For this reason, every Sunday we confess – no, we pray – in the Nicene Creed: *He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead*. That God will help us to see just how desperately we need his justice. Do you now see why God’s judgment is, all at the same time, immensely terrifying and deeply comforting? Yes, wicked people may prosper in this world, and they may get away with it. And yes, they might ultimately get away with it by dying, before having to face any real consequences. But with God, it will only be for a short while. Sinners will not escape the judgment of God – even in death. And that is why they should be terrified.

But God’s enactment of justice is also deeply comforting, is it not? Because for those who are oppressed and marginalized Christ has promised that he will bring every single one of their oppressors to their knees, and on that day they will have to give an account for their sins. *No one will escape it*.[[5]](#footnote-5) Though we remain haunted by everything that’s wrong with this world, it is still deeply comforting because for the millions of Jews who were gassed like dogs during the holocaust, because for the millions of innocent children who are suffering and are being abused on a daily basis, Christ, by entering into this world in the form of a slave (Phil. 2:7), has chosen to identify himself with them and to go through what they are going through. Though Christ was without sin – though he was totally innocent and blameless – like a sheep he was led to slaughter and in his humiliation justice was denied to Jesus first (Acts 8:33). But the mystery of the gospel is precisely this: in being denied justice, Jesus restored justice.

The gospel shows us that Jesus is on the side of the oppressed, precisely because he suffered and died as one who was himself oppressed. And because of that, God has not forgotten them. He sees them. He hears them. And he is with them. Which includes so many of you. So, along with the Preacher, we have great reason to despair, but praise be to God we have a greater reason to hope, because through faith the gospel now opens us up to see that God’s judgment has come and will come again in Christ, who is perfect justice. Amen.

1. Allison Chawla, “The Disturbing Reality of Human Trafficking and Children, In Today’s World…,” *Huffington Post*, February 25, 2017, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-disturbing-reality-of-human-trafficking-and-children\_b\_58b1d696e4b0658fc20f95fa. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “Homeless Youth,” *National Coalition for the Homeless*, August, 2007, http://www.nationalhomeless.org/publications/facts/youth.pdf. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *The Mighty and the Almighty: An Essay in Political Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 90. “To wrong someone is to deprive her of something to which she has a right, a legimate caim. And to deprive her of something to which she has a right or a legitimate claim is to treat her unjustly. So instead of saying that it is the God-assigned task of government to curb wrongdoing, we could say that it is the God-assigned task of government to *curb injustice*. Or we could say that is it the God-assigned task of government *to protect the rights* of the public. God has assigned government the task of being a *rights-protecting* institution. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice: Right and Wrongs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Wolterstorff, *Justice*, 124. “Jesus did not mean, literally, that justice requires that beggars become kings and kings become beggars. The beggars would soon start acting like kings. The clue to the meaning of the theme of social inversion lies in his sentence, ‘all who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted.’ The coming of justice requires the humbling of those who exalt themselves. The arrogant must be cured of their arrogance; the rich and powerful must be cured of their attachment to wealth and power. Only then is justice for all possible.” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)