

## Non-Justice (part 1)

by Bill Moller (a sermon transcript—Matt 18:21-35)

The title of this message is listed as “Non-Justice (part 1)”. We all know what “justice” is, right? Justice is getting what you deserve:

Cheat on a test - fail the course  
Commit a crime - go to prison

That’s justice. We like the concept of justice. It balances the scales. We’ve all seen the symbol at our courthouses of the “Scales of Justice” often held in the hands of a blindfolded figure. American Blind Justice!

We hear it said after a trial that, “Justice was or wasn’t served.” When the verdict came in on the O. J. Simpson case there was a huge outcry. Many felt that the former football star had gotten away with a crime, that he didn’t get what he deserved. That letting him off was an evil in-justice. Generally we feel that shouldn’t happen in a nation built on the rule of law – we believe in justice.

My sister works for the World Justice Project. That organization defines the rule of law as: “... a system of rules and rights that enables fair and functioning societies” That sounds pretty good, doesn’t it? We setup rules we believe are fair and mutually agree to live by those rules. Justice follows rules – do something wrong and you get what you deserve.

If you owe money, justice tells us you should pay it back. Run up a debt beyond what you can afford and you somehow have to pay a price. And yet, today’s passage seems to demonstrate a very different principle - something called mercy.



A creditor can choose not to require payment from the debtor. That’s not justice!

Theologian R. C. Sproul speaks about “mercy” as non-justice. He says there is justice and there is non-justice. With justice we get what we deserve. With non-Justice we don’t get what we deserve. But, there are two kinds of non-justice – one is evil (someone getting away with murder – in-justice), the other is not evil (forgiving a debt - mercy). People can choose to forgive a debt. Brothers and sisters in Christ, our faith is based in non-justice – our faith is based on Mercy.

We read in Romans 6:23:

“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Hosea 6:6 reads:

“For I desire mercy, not sacrifice...”

As a Christian, my faith is in a God who demonstrates mercy over justice. And God tells us we are to do for others as he has done for us. We’re not to require sacrificial payments or demand justice – we are to offer mercy. That’s what we read in today’s passage.

A slave is brought to account and is unable to pay his debt, so the king chooses to obtain justice by selling the slave and his family to raise the funds needed to pay the debt. But, the slave pleaded with the king and rather than justice, mercy was extended – the slave was freed and the debt was cancelled. Non-justice occurs, and we like it. As a matter of fact, when that freed slave later attempts to exercise justice by imprisoning

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someone who owed him money and couldn't pay, the others in the story baulk when the debtors are thrown in prison. Wait a minute! I thought we like justice? Now suddenly, we're crying out for non-justice. We want mercy. In this passage of scripture, justice has been ousted by mercy.

Okay, I'm making a big claim here. We've always heard that God is just. Right? Psalm 50: 6 reads:

"And the heavens proclaim his righteousness, for he is a God of justice."

Deuteronomy 32:35 says:

"It is mine to avenge; I will repay."

That sounds like our God is all about justice.

Yet, we seem to see something else is true of our God. Our God is merciful. How can that be? How can justice and non-justice coexist?

How, in one instance, can someone get what they deserve and, in another instance, not get what they deserve? That goes against our concept of fairness. Apparently the Christian faith is not as black and white as some might believe.

But let's take deep breath, step back, and look at where else non-justice - in the form of mercy - occurs in Scripture.

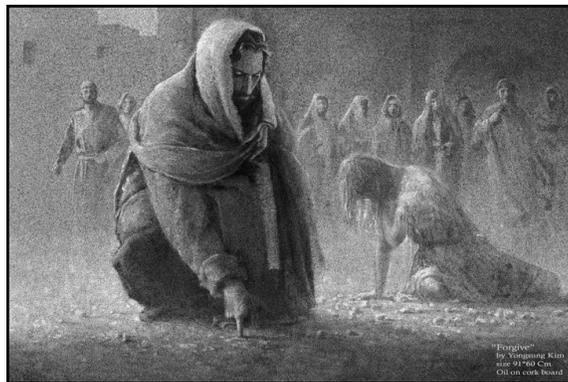
David, the anointed king of Israel, is stalked by Saul and at one point David hides in a cave. Providentially, Saul wanders by and decides to use that cave as his personal toilet. Saul had only recently killed all the priests in the city of Nob, and David had a perfect opportunity to balance the scales of justice and take Saul's life, David's followers were even pressing him to do so, but instead David shows mercy and doesn't kill Saul. Non-justice.

In the book of Hosea, we learn about God telling a man to marry a harlot and to repeatedly take her back even when she wanders from their marriage bed. Non-justice.

In chapter 8 of the Gospel of John, we read about a woman caught in the act of adultery. Now, the law says she is to be stoned to death. What does Jesus say - "Go now and leave your life of sin." Non-justice.

What happened to justice?

Peter asks a simple question. "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me?"



Wait a minute! If someone sins against me shouldn't I be calling for justice? The response Jesus gives is hyperbole - "not seven times, but seventy-seven times" (some translations read seventy times seven) - it implies that we should never

stop forgiving.

I repeat, what happened to justice?

At this point I'm sure some of you are wondering where I'm going with this. You're thinking Bill has gone off the deep end. You're probably thinking, what about the whole idea the Jesus took our punishment upon himself so that we wouldn't have to die for our sins. Isn't that the balancing of the scales justice demands?

Yes, if you see it as punishment for a crime - we sinned and someone has to pay the price. Yet, what if Jesus' death on the cross was an act of mercy, not of justice. What if God is showing us by example that rather than demanding justice we are supposed to offer mercy instead? When someone wrongs us, we're supposed to forgive them. Wow!

So what would that look like?

Well, Jesus covered that earlier in the chapter. Matthew 18 is famous for addressing how we are to handle situations when people wrong each other. One thing we don't do is ignore sin.

Verses 15-17 read:

"If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector."

Let me repeat that last part: "treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector". So, we don't demand justice, instead we go to the offender and give them an opportunity to repent. But, if the person won't repent of their sin – won't admit they wrong you – you are to treat them as a pagan or a tax collector.

Hmm? How are we to treat pagans and tax collectors?

Would someone do me a favor and look up Matthew 9:10.

Please read that verse:

While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples.

Wait a minute! You're telling me we're supposed to have dinner with them?

This is getting out of control?

I need another volunteer to look up Matt 5:38-42.

"You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

Where's the justice in that?

One more passage – someone read Matt 5: 43-48.

"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Love my enemy? Pray for those who persecute us?

If we were to really apply this lesson on non-justice (mercy) what would it look like? Really! What would it look like?

Well how about this:

When someone cuts you off in the parking lot of the supermarket should we call them names and make angry gesture at them, and say, "I hope you get a ticket for that."



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I think not!

When a person you work with eats all the donuts you brought to the office before anyone has a chance to get to the box. Do we harbor resentment, and swear to never bring donuts again?

Maybe not.

How about at church, when someone leaves a mess right in the middle of where you just cleaned. Do we call for excommunication?

No. We forgive them.

Okay, in those examples it might not be too hard to show mercy. What about in the more serious aspects of life. Let's watch this video and see how we feel about this scenario...

Video available from **Skit Guys**:

**Mercy: Husband and Wife**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E5HdrfXnlkE>

Now, please don't hear what I'm not saying – I'm not saying that anyone should stay in an abusive relationship or allow a crook to take advantage of

them.

What I am saying is we need to heed the lessons of Matthew 18 –



First, about how to handle sin between one another – going to them, bringing witnesses, presenting the issue to the church and giving the person the chance to repent

Secondly, how to offer mercy to others – as we should do for pagans or tax collectors. It is often said that we Christians tend to “shoot the wounded” – when someone sins we are quick to drag them over the coals. But that's not showing mercy. That's not extending the gift that God has already offered to us.

None of us are very good at this. God pressed me all week with situations where I struggled with offering mercy – and if too many cases I failed the challenge. Many of us fail this challenge. Next week we'll look at someone who also struggle with the idea of mercy. Jonah.

Let's pray...