

# JESUS & JUSTICE

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## Why It's Hard to Talk About & Why We Must The J-Word (Part 1) | Luke 4:14-30

For years now, it has often been controversial to say the "J-Word" in many public settings. You can speak of "spirituality" or, perhaps, a "higher power." You might mention "God," so long as you don't mind the attacking question: "WHOSE God?" But if you are a Christian speaking at a high school graduation or being interviewed after winning the Superbowl... If you are the victim of a tragedy and a reporter asks you: "*How are you making it through?*" It will be fine if you mention the influence of your parents or your coaches or your neighbors... But if you mention "JESUS"... If you talk about how you owe your life and gifts to Jesus... or have put your hope in Jesus... you might well expect a wince or a quick shift of the conversation or camera. For many people outside the church, **JESUS** is the "J-Word."

It seems to me that there is another "J-Word" that sets people on edge. Like the name of Jesus, this other J-Word floods people with images and associations that either inspire them or enflame them. The mere mention of this word these days frequently divides people into "US" and "THEM." Strangely, this other controversial word is as present in the Bible AND as associated with God's heart as Jesus is. In fact, Jesus and this other word are profoundly related. If JESUS is the word it's hard to talk about outside the Church, it seems to me that **JUSTICE** is the J-Word that's become hard to talk about inside the church. How many of you winced when I said the word. Who of us thought, "*Oh no, here we go!*" How happy would you be if we changed the conversation topic right now? I get it.

The subject of JUSTICE is hard to talk about, in part, because there's so much disagreement these days about what the word even means. For some people, justice feels mainly about law and order. It's about putting more resources into law enforcement and exercising better controls at the border and respecting boundaries in all kinds of places. It's about holding people accountable for when they do wrong and making sure that people get rewarded when they do right. It's about respecting initiative and personal responsibility and private property and stable families. Can you resonate with any of that?

For others, the word JUSTICE feels more about resources and repair. It's about making sure that people have the resources they need to have a fair chance at flourishing. It involves looking at the history, systems and structures of society that have left some folks with far fewer of the educational, material and relational resources that most of us who are flourishing have had. It's about confessing where there has not been equal protection under the law. Justice, in this view, has to do with repairing what's gotten broken in the basic framework of opportunity and trying to resource people more fully for success. Can you resonate with any of that?

I'm guessing that when we step back from the fray, most reasonable people will resonate with elements of both sides of this understanding of JUSTICE. The problem right now is that we almost never get to step back from the fray! We're constantly hammered by voices that emphasize one side of the definition of justice to the exclusion of the other and try to jam it down our throats. Whether it's Critical Race Theory or White Supremacy, there are also extremists out there who so understandably upset us that we can stop even looking to find a credible balance between the values of Resource & Repair and Law & Order. Then along come voices on the Red and Blue channels who demonize even credible people who are simply trying to make sure this side of the continuum of justice doesn't get lost. No wonder JUSTICE is hard to discuss.

But it can't let it get lost in the Church. Even if the word Justice has gotten loaded with all kinds of partisan meanings and poor associations, we can't abandon it. We need to remember what the J-Word means to God. Tom Long, a seminary professor of mine once told me: "The Church is the Language School of the Kingdom of God." We don't abandon words like LOVE or GRACE when they get hijacked or misused by the surrounding world; no, we work to reimbue the word with its beautiful biblical meaning.

So, for today and next week when my good friend, Dr. Nicholas Pearce, speaks with us, and for the following week when I wrap up the series, I'm asking you to try to separate yourself from the smoke and chaos around us. Forget for a moment all the repugnant and upsetting ways that some people are describing reality. And fix your eyes instead upon Jesus and what he and a long biblical tradition has to say about the beautiful, inspiring, life-changing, world-shaping theme of JUSTICE. Will you do that with me?

Our journey begins at the start of the public ministry of Jesus. I think it's crucial to note what happens at this point because, in the Bible, the things that happen **"in the beginning"** (**Gen 1:1**) are often major cues as to the First Principles or the Major Priorities God wants us to really get.

The Gospel writer, Luke, describes the start of Jesus' public ministry like this. First, Jesus is baptized in the Jordan River by his cousin, John. Luke 3 reads: **And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."** (**Luke 3:22**). Now, this is really important because Jesus is going to be able to handle a lot of coming challenges and make a lot of tough choices because he is clear about his IDENTITY. Jesus will play a lot of roles in life. He'll be a carpenter, a rabbi, a healer, a convicted criminal, a guest, a host. But his core identity (the reality from which he lives in every setting) is as the beloved child of his Father in heaven.

By the way, that is meant to be your identity and mine too. The Bible says: **To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, [Jesus] gave the right to become children of God (John 1:12)**. What that means is that if you have received Jesus into your heart, your IDENTITY – the core, most defining thing about

you -- is that you are a beloved child of the heavenly Father. In the Kingdom of God, there are no Identity Politics as practiced today. As Christians, we will appropriately seek to understand and appreciate how someone's skin color, political party, economic status, job position or life experience has influenced them. We'll think about how these factors have shaped us. But we regard everyone from the vantage point of the love that the heavenly Father has for his children. That's how Jesus-followers view IDENTITY.

But the story goes on. We're next told that fortified by this profound affirmation of his identity as God's beloved child, **Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted [tested] by the devil. (Luke 4:1-2).** Many of you know this story well, but I invite you to think about it freshly. In a nutshell, the Devil calls Jesus to make three things his PRIORITY. Satan calls Jesus to prioritize material security (bread), earthly power (kingdoms of the world), and public status (adoration of the temple crowd). Jesus had a complete right to all of these privileges. He had enjoyed security, power and status in heaven on a cosmic scale. In each test, however, Jesus says to Satan: "NO. I will put my Father's Word and serving his Way, FIRST." And then, through the rest of the Gospel story, we watch as Jesus keeps making these same choices. In circumstance after circumstance, we see Jesus using his security, power, and status, not to serve himself but for God's purposes -- to lift up others.

This is another one of those "in the beginning" patterns that I think is meant to inform how you and I go at life too. Conversations about JUSTICE eventually bump into the themes of security, power, and status. We're constantly being tested as to how we will view these things or help others find these things. If my IDENTITY is, "I'm a beloved child of God who knows how much my Father in heaven loves everyone," will my PRIORITY be maintaining my security, power and status? Or will it tend toward using these privileges as tools to advance the Kingdom of God, the thriving of others, first?

Luke's Gospel goes on to say that: **Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised him. He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. (Luke 4:14-17)**

Let's pause here and just acknowledge that this is a BIG moment. Jesus is just starting the public work that will make him the most talked about and revered person in history. He's going to reveal the nature of God's kingdom to the world. He's going to give his life on a cross for the forgiveness of your sins and mine. He's going to demonstrate God's power to bring life out of death. He's going to found a Church that will become the largest continuous corporation the world has ever seen. And he's about to give his first sermon about his mission in his HOME church.

It's a story for another day, but I thought long and hard about what I wanted to preach about on my first Sunday here. I wanted to pick a passage of Scripture that expressed something absolutely central to my heart and hopes and to what I felt God was calling us to as a people. I dare to think that Jesus thought every bit as carefully about what his sermon text would be when he stood up in that Nazareth synagogue.

**Unrolling [the scroll], he found the place where it is written: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. He began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:17-21)**

The verses from Isaiah (58:6; 66:1-2) that Jesus read from were commonly viewed by Jews as a prophecy about the Messiah. In choosing that text, Jesus was saying: I am the Messiah finally among you. The prophecy has been fulfilled. What I find interesting is that Jesus chose THIS particular prophecy to highlight. The Old Testament is jammed with prophecies about the Messiah. They tell us to expect someone who will die on a cross. They tell us to look for someone who is a descendant of King David. They even exhort us to expect somebody who'll come riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. But THIS text tells us to be ready to embrace and follow someone who loves JUSTICE.

I'm bringing good news for the poor, says Jesus, and for people who've messed up and gotten themselves thrown in jail. I'm going to give sight to the blind and set people free from their crushing burdens. I'm proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor – which was a reference to the Jewish tradition of Jubilee, where God instructed his people to wipe away the debts of people who couldn't get out from under them. Jesus is saying, in other words, God has a special heart for people who lack security, power or status. Don't get me wrong, God cares about law and order for sure. In the first chapter of Isaiah's prophecy, God says: **Stop doing wrong. Learn to do right; seek justice. (Isaiah 1:16).** But in the very next verse God makes it clear that he is also passionate about the ministry of resource and repair. He says: **Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow. (Isaiah 1:17).**

I imagine some of you saying, "*Oh no, Dan, you've missed the point. Jesus wasn't really out to advance JUSTICE so much as spiritual freedom. He's come for the poor in spirit. He's going to free people from being prisoners of sin. He's going to give sight to people who are spiritually blind and forgive people's moral debts."* And that's all true. Jesus does all that too. He's just that good.

But notice how Jesus later describes the acts of the people he regarded as the sheep who were following him versus the goats that were going another way (Matt 25:34-36).

Notice the similarity between the behaviors toward vulnerable people he says he's come to help in his Nazareth message and those he says God will reward at the final judgment. We'll talk more about this in the next two weeks, but I think there is no way to read the Gospels or the Old Testament closely and not come away with the conviction that God is out to redeem bodies and families and systems and societies, as well as souls.

In his book, *SURPRISED BY HOPE*, British evangelical scholar N.T. Wright says: "*God created a good creation, mourned the fall of humanity, raised up Israel to model a better way, and then sent Jesus to set the whole world right. Jesus died on the cross to carry out God's justice – his promise to set the world right and flood the creation with his glory.*" What Wright means is that Jesus came for nothing less than to inaugurate the restoration of God's creation to its original glory. He's come to restore what the Hebrews called the great "*Shalom*," the peace and flourishing God intended for everyone. Let's be clear, that won't happen finally and fully till Jesus comes again, but it starts now and you and I get to be part of that movement – so long as we're not afraid of the J-Word.

Let us pray...

Great God of love and justice, thank you that you care for life on this planet. Thank you that there is no individual life or family or system or soul that you do not long to LIFT to it's best potential. As we go on this journey to understand and reflect your heart more fully, break down whatever resistances or myths or ways of thinking and acting that are in concert with your Spirit. Encourage us with all that you are already doing through us for good and continue to flow through us. For we know that... *In the crushing, In the pressing, You are making new wine, In the soil we now surrender, You are breaking new ground.* In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.