

## **“Playing Church”**

### **Isaiah 1:1, 10-20**

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What is biblical justice? I hope you discussed this in Sunday school. Every teacher in the children, youth and adult classes was provided a lesson on this topic and encouraged to have this discussion in order to learn more about our theme for the year, Micah’s Challenge. “What does the Lord require of you? To do justly, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God.” Later in the year we’ll dedicate a Sunday to studying the other parts of this challenge, compassion and humility.

Justice is a major theme in the Bible, especially, but not limited to the prophetic writings. As Michael Guinan writes, “There is absolutely no concept in the Old Testament with so central a significance for all the relationships of human life as justice.” Today’s text is a good example of this and will guide our thoughts.

There is no shortage of attention given to the struggle for justice in our own culture, too. Last week I read several articles about the Little Rock Nine, the Jena Six and the crisis in Myanmar. September 25th marked the fiftieth anniversary of the desegregation of the Little Rock high schools and on September 20<sup>th</sup>, fifty thousand people assembled in Jena, Louisiana to protest what they consider unfair treatment of six young African-Americans. The protestors believe that the charges against these young men were disproportionate to the crime and were racially motivated. In addition, over 100,000 Burmese citizens marched in Yangon last week reflecting discontent over economic hardship and political repression.

**What is biblical justice?** I’m not sure the Bible defines it. It tells us what the results of doing justly are, or even what the landscape looks like when justice is missing. It is up to us, however, to explain it.

Perhaps this is because justice is usually the object of the verb “to do.” It is an active concept best defined through the actions it produces.

Having said this, I feel the need to define it today with the hope that those of us that live in covenant with God will live justly as Isaiah encouraged his readers to do.

I believe justice is doing what is right, correcting what is wrong and making a place at the table for everyone. Let me elaborate.

**Justice is doing what is right.** It is living by the Golden Rule and making decisions that are good for everyone. It is building relationships in the marketplace, the neighborhood or the family upon goodness, truth, mercy and compassion. It is living above the culture’s values, refusing to be greedy, power-hungry or complacent. It is being honest, trustworthy, reliable, dependable and fair in our dealings with all people.

Justice is the recognition, according to Tom Ehrlich, that life matters, how we treat others matters and the choices we make here and now matter. Our decisions reveal our character and make the world better or worse. Pursuing justice makes it better.

**Justice is correcting what is wrong.** At times, to do justly means to confess mistakes, ask forgiveness and repair the damage caused by injustice, knowing that a God of mercy and grace will help in that redemptive process. Our text certainly teaches this.

Isaiah has gone to the temple in Jerusalem during one of the annual festivals and delivered a message that is anything but celebratory.

“Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom; listen to the law of our God, you people of Gomorrah! ‘The multitude of your sacrifices, what are they to me?’ says the Lord.

‘I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals. I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling in my courts? Stop bringing meaningless offerings!