

“The Silence of the Suffering Servant”

Matthew 26:47-68

February 28, 2021

Justice is an important topic in our nation today. And for the Christian, it's important that one's understanding of justice begins with God. Most everyone would say that justice is a good thing and necessary to a civilized society. But what is the standard by which justice is measured? Is it merely the law of the land or a person's conscience which may or may not be corrupted? No, the ultimate standard by which justice should be measured is the character of God because justice is an attribute of God Himself. Psalm 89 says of God, **“Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; lovingkindness and truth go before you”** (Ps 89:14). In other words, God rules and reigns according to justice and righteousness—that's what it means for them to be the foundation of His throne. But notice that His ways are also characterized by lovingkindness—the word is *hesed* in Psalm 89, referring to God's covenant faithfulness by which all of His positive attributes of goodness, care, and favor are brought to bear on the one He loves. Notice here in Ps 89:14, that justice and lovingkindness (also translated as mercy), are not far apart. They are close together in the heart of God. This is because God's view of justice includes mercy for the weak.

Hence Dt. 10 says, *“For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. ¹⁸ He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing.”* (Dt 10:17-19) So biblical justice is not only about penalties for wrongdoing, but also about the standard of lovingkindness or mercy by which we are to treat those who are suffering or in need. Conversely, *injustice*, from the Bible's point of view, is when the strong take advantage of the weak. But notice in Dt 10 that God, *the strong One* [“God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the might, and the awesome

God”], does not abuse His position of strength to take advantage of the weak, but rather uses His strength to care for the weak. [1 Peter 3:7]¹

So God's justice in the Bible calls us to not only to do what is right according to God's character and word, treating others fairly with a life of integrity in which we do not show partiality, but also calls us to show mercy and lovingkindness by attending to the needs of the vulnerable: the poor, needy, fatherless, and oppressed, and those suffering affliction.

If we are to treat one another justly because God is just, how much more should the Son of God have been treated justly on this earth? And yet we are going to see today that He was treated with grave injustice. What's even more shocking is that God, the Just One, was working to bring mercy to sinners through the very injustices that were heaped on Jesus.

Does this not bring us again to the tension we see in Scripture? I've suggested to you that justice and mercy are close together in the heart of God, yet there seems to also be a tension between them. How can God be absolutely just (without partiality) and yet extend mercy to sinners? Well, what God does *not* do is merely overlook our sin—that would be unjust. Rather He absorbs the cost of our sin Himself in Christ, so that justice is served (sin is penalized through the cross), yet sinners can receive mercy and salvation from the condemnation of their sin.

Perhaps it would be helpful for me to suggest that though justice is absolutely essential to a biblical world view, justice (as we normally think of it) is not the highest ideal in the Bible. There is something birthed out of justice that exceeds justice and that is *mercy*. Mercy exceeds justice! This is how James 2:13 can say, “mercy triumphs over judgment.”

¹ This is how God calls husbands to use their position of strength and leadership, to care for their wives and family rather than taking advantage of them. 1 Peter 3:7 calls husbands to “live with their wives *in an understand way, as with someone weaker* since she is a woman; and *show here honor* as a fellow heir of the grace of life, so that your prayers will not be hindered.” Notice there is punitive discipline

for husbands to do otherwise (“your prayers will be hindered”). Living justly in one's home, husbands, means using our strength to care for and honor our wives rather than taking advantage of our strength (or their weaker position) for selfish means.

Today we are going to see the injustice that Jesus endured in the process of extending mercy to sinners so that mercy could triumph over judgment. There are two things happening in this passage much like a movie picture and movie soundtrack work together to deliver a powerful message. When you watch a movie, the music adds so much to the picture and is never meant to detract from the picture but to give emphasis and color to what is happening on the screen. The central character in this picture is Jesus Himself, not Judas, or the disciples, or the Sanhedrin. Don't get so distracted by the betrayal, kiss, false accusations, and the disciples' failure that you miss the strength of Jesus as He faces grave injustice.

Now to draw this out, let's first listen to the 'soundtrack' by examining all the background stuff that's happening in this passage. We're going to hear all the dissonant chords of injustice that are played in conjunction with Judas, the disciples, and the Sanhedrin. Then we are going to listen again with the help of some historical background (like commentary on the soundtrack) that will make the dissonance of injustice even more distinct. Finally, we will focus on Jesus in this context to see how His words and His silence unfold God's will and pave the way for mercy to triumph over judgment.

The Dissonance of Injustice

So let's begin with highlighting the dissonant cords of injustice:

- *Judas betraying* (vs. 47-49), as he leads a delegation from the Sanhedrin to arrest Jesus and betrays him with a kiss.
- *The mob arresting Jesus* (vs. 50) for mere political reasons.
- *Peter fighting* (51), as he impulsively swings a sword and cuts off someone's ear.
- *The disciples fleeing* (vs. 56). Unfaithfulness is a form of injustice whereas God's justice is characterized by covenant faithfulness.
- *Peter following at a distance* as they led Jesus away (vs. 58); his self-confident loyalty is being eroded by cowardice.

- *Malicious intent of the Sanhedrin* (vs. 59) seeking to attain false testimony against Jesus.
- *False witnesses* (vs 61) who twisted Jesus' words out of context.
- *False accusations* of blasphemy (vs. 65)
- *Sanhedrin falsely condemning Jesus* (vs. 66).
- *Sanhedrin abusing Jesus* (vs. 67), as they spat on him, beat him, and slapped him.

Even a cursory reading of this text 2 thousand years later, from a different culture and language can't miss the dissonant chords of injustice without exception. Other than Jesus, every person acts either foolishly (Peter), unfaithfully (disciples), or maliciously (Judas, Sanhedrin). Yet it's even worse than it first appears.

The Dissonance of Injustice Accentuated

Let me give you some additional background into the justice system of the day that will highlight the gross nature of the injustice Jesus endured. Jurisprudence for the Sanhedrin (Jewish 'Supreme Court') was very specific in capital offense cases:²

- All criminal cases were to be tried during the daytime. But Jesus was tried at night.
- Criminal cases could not be tried during Passover. Jesus was tried during Passover.
- A case could not be started and finished on the same day unless the verdict was "not guilty." A night had to lapse so that feelings of mercy might have time to rise. Yet no time as allowed to lapse before the verdict.
- The Sanhedrin had to meet in their official meeting place to issue a valid verdict. But vs. 58 indicates they met initially in the private quarters of the High Priest.
- All evidence had to be verified by two witnesses who were examined separately without having any contact with each other. The

² Background points taken from Barclay (*The Daily Study Bible*, vol. 2, p. 390-391), MacArthur (MacArthur NT Commentary: Matthew 24-28, 198-210), and D.A. Carson (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*, pg. 549-550).

punishment for false witness was death. Yet according to vs. 59, the court itself sought false witnesses.

- The proceedings were supposed to begin by presenting all of the evidence for one's innocence first and then evidence for one's alleged guilt. But Jesus was given no defense.
- If the accused was found guilty, the sentence was not to be pronounced until two days later. During those two days, the council was to fast and on the morning of the third day each judge was asked whether or not he had changed his mind about the verdict. But no time was given for the judges to reconsider their decision regarding Jesus.
- If the council voted unanimously for conviction, the accused was set free, because the necessary element of mercy was assumed to be lacking among the court.³ This was not the case for Jesus.
- If the guilty verdict was confirmed, an officer slowly led the accused to the place of execution while a herald ran ahead announcing several things:
 - The criminal's name
 - The crime and the punishment
 - The names of witnesses
 - And if anyone had evidence in favor of the accused, they would bring him back to the counsel for retrial because of new evidence.

This process appears to have been eclipsed according to the Gospels.

*The governing principle for the Sanhedrin in capital cases was that they were to do everything they could to ensure the safety of life so as not to destroy life carelessly.*⁴ With this background info you can see why Matthew would record the careful details of Jesus trial. It reveals how blatantly unjust and malicious His so-called 'trial' was.

Jesus' Response to God's Will and Man's Injustice

³ MacArthur, 200

⁴ MacArthur, 200

⁵ This is not a statement on pacifism but a rebuke for foolishness.

Now we turn our attention to the center of the screen to focus on Jesus. And the key question is, "how did Jesus respond to this injustice, and why?" Here I point you to the four times that Jesus speaks and His deafening silence in vs. 63 during the mock trial.

The only way to make sense of Jesus response, is through the lens of Gethsemane that we saw last week. There Jesus prayed, "if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me, but not My will but Yours be done." There Jesus resolved to do the Father's will and drink 'the cup.' What was the cup? The righteous wrath of God poured out to judge sin and satisfy the *justice* of God. And this judgment would be poured on Christ so that mercy for sinners could triumph over judgment.

Now with this is mind, listen to what Jesus says. First, He speaks to Judas in vs. 50: "*Friend do what you have come for.*" Jesus does not resist. He does not erupt emotionally to Judas' betrayal. In a sense, he tells Judas to 'get on with it' knowing that this is the path the Father as willed Him to walk, even though it comes through the painful kiss of betrayal.

Second, Jesus speaks to Peter who impulsively drew his sword and cut off someone's ear in a near fatality. He rebukes Peter as foolish in vs. 52: "*Put your sword back in its place; for all those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword.*"⁵ 'Do you think you are going to win against this mob?' Then Jesus proceeds to rebuke Peter for his lack of faith (53): "*Do you think that I cannot appeal to My Father, and He will at once put at My disposal more than twelve legions⁶ of angels? How then will the Scriptures be fulfilled, which say it must happen this way?"*

The point of what Jesus is saying, is that He has more than enough power and authority to overcome His enemies, but He refuses to resist because He has a higher purpose to accomplish—His Father's will must be executed and the Scriptures must be fulfilled.

⁶ In military terms, one legion was 6000 soldiers.

Then Jesus speaks a 3rd time, this time to those who have come to arrest Him. Vs. 55: *“Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest Me as you would against a robber? Every day I used to sit in the temple teaching, and you did not seize Me. But all this has taken place to fulfill the Scriptures of the prophets.”* Jesus, in essence, puts his accusers on trial. They are the ones acting unlawfully and deceitfully under the cover of night when Jesus has done all things in the open, having nothing to hide. Yet Jesus, like an innocent Lamb, will be led away to slaughter so that the Scriptures will be fulfilled, and that God’s will be done.

Finally Jesus speaks only once during His ‘trial’ when asked under oath if He is the Christ. He says in vs. 64, “You have said it yourself; nevertheless I tell you, hereafter you shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of power, and coming on the clouds of heaven.” Here Jesus applies Daniel 7:13 and Psalm 110 to Himself as the Messiah and Son of God who will have the final word of judgment over every man, including His accusers!

From these four statements of Jesus, what do we see? Regardless of Jesus’ power and authority and innocence, He will not allow man’s injustice to keep Him from faithfully pursuing and fulfilling God’s will and purpose for His life—to drink the cup so that mercy will triumph over judgment. *Instead of reacting to man’s injustice, Jesus responds to His Father’s will.*

The Silence of the Suffering Servant

Now add to this Jesus’ remarkable, deafening silence in [vs. 63]. He is being falsely accused without due process and yet He does not defend Himself against such in justice. Later in chapter 27, Jesus will be intentionally silent two more times before Pilate:

- 27:12 – “And while He was being accused by the chief priests and elders, *He did not answer.*”
- 27:14 – “And He *did not answer* [Pilate] *with regard to even a single charge.*”

Why does Jesus not defend Himself when He easily could? Because this moment in the life of Jesus is not merely about the unjust actions of others. Its ultimately about Jesus’ resolve to do His Father’s will. Jesus crossed that bridge in Gethsemane and now *He is free to not defend Himself before men*

because He knows He is walking in obedience to his Father. Jesus is living vertically rather than merely horizontally. This road that He is walking to the cross is not primarily a matter between Jesus and the Sanhedrin. It is primarily between Jesus and His Father.

In His silence, we see Jesus as the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53:7: “He was *oppressed*, and He was *afflicted*, yet He did not open His mouth; like a lamb that is led to slaughter, and like a sheep that is *silent* before its shearers, so He did not open His mouth.”

This is not to say that we should not speak for ourselves in matters of justice. But it is to say that our obedience to God takes precedence over our desire to be vindicated among men. There is a remarkable life principle here: ***Mercy will triumph over judgment when we focus on our faithfulness to God and His will over man’s unfairness toward us.*** In other words, we must live vertically first, if we will live horizontally with mercy. Let your resolve to honor God and do His will determine how you respond to people.

This is an incredibly freeing way to live, especially when others treat you unfairly.

- You are free to honor God by doing what’s right regardless of what others say or do to you. That’s living vertically.
- You are free to live unselfishly when others treat you selfishly.
- You are free to forgive and not harbor bitterness when others have sinned against you, because God’s will is for mercy to triumph over judgment.
- You are free to love and serve the other person, because that is God’s will for you, regardless of how they respond.
- You are free to respond with humility and extend grace and mercy because God’s will is for you to not only do justice but love mercy, and walk humbly with your God (Micah 6:8).
- You are free to guard your tongue and speak the truth in love, because this is God’s will for you. Live vertically!
- You are free to live sacrificially, to pray for those who persecute you and bless those who make you bristle, because whatever the situation, it is not ultimately about them. It’s about your heavenly Father.

Peter, who once followed at a distance (26:58), later had the wisdom to call us to follow Christ with the same vertical focus that Jesus had. Let's read Peter's words together:

1 Peter 2:21-25; 4:19; 3:8-9

For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously; and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness... Therefore, those who suffer according to the will of God shall entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.... To sum up, all of you be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble in spirit; not returning evil for evil or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead...

Mercy triumphs over judgment!