

**Get Smart Get Wise: The Justice of Shalom**  
 Proverbs 3:27-30, 11:10-11; 29:7 and other proverbs  
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Have you ever looked out at a brokenness and wished you could solve it?

All across Canada over the last several months there have been efforts to remove homeless camps from the downtowns of cities. It's happening in Vancouver and Toronto; it's happening in Halifax, and it's happened in Prince George.

And it is a complex issue. On one hand it's hard for downtown businesses to prosper when street life is on their doorsteps, and on the other hand if you evict homeless people where do they go?

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If you are just joining us today in person or online we welcome you here. And we are going through the book of Proverbs which is all about probability. It's constructed on the idea that God built this world on the foundation of wisdom, and so when we incorporate God's wisdom into our lives things likely go well. But wisdom isn't easy.

And so today we are going to wrestle with the wisdom of justice that sits at the very center of Proverbs and indeed the Gospel.

So if you've got a Bible go ahead and open it to Proverbs 3 – that's going to be our main text – but we are going to jump around a bit and I'm going to start a little different than I usually do; by reading a selection of proverbs from across the book. So would you stand with me as we come before God's word? Hear now the word of the Lord.

Blessed are those who find wisdom,  
 those who gain understanding...  
 By wisdom the LORD laid the earth's foundations,  
 by understanding He set the heavens in place;  
 by His knowledge the watery depths were divided,  
 and the clouds let drop the dew. (Proverbs 3:13-20)

Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due,  
 when it is in your power to act.  
 Do not say to your neighbor,  
 "Come back tomorrow and I'll give it to you"—  
 when you already have it with you.  
 Do not plot harm against your neighbor,  
 who lives trustfully near you.  
 Do not accuse anyone for no reason—  
 when they have done you no harm. (Proverbs 3:27-30)

When the righteous prosper, the city rejoices;  
 when the wicked perish, there are shouts of joy.  
 Through the blessing of the upright a city is exalted,  
 but by the mouth of the wicked it is destroyed. (Proverbs 11:10-11)

Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the LORD,  
 and He will reward them for what they have done. (Proverbs 19:17)

The righteous care about justice for the poor,  
 but the wicked have no such concern. (Proverbs 29:7)

This is the word of the Lord; you may be seated.

So there is an intimate and graphic connection between wisdom and justice in scripture. Proverbs says, “The righteous care about justice for the poor.” The word “care” here is actually the Hebrew word we usually translate “know”, k-n-o-w. As in Adam knew his wife Eve, and she conceived a son.”

So the righteous know justice for the poor. It’s intimately part of them, but the wicked don’t share this concern. Here’s the point: God thinks there is an intimate connection between wisdom and justice. And we are going to work to unpack that.

So we are going to three places: We are going to start by defining justice. Then we are going to look at the people who do it, and finally the grace we need to embody it. So what is justice, who does it, and how do we get there?<sup>1</sup> First, what is justice?

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In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus starts with something we call the “Beatitudes.” He says “Blessed are the poor in Spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.” “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied.”

And the word “blessed” that He uses has a Hebrew root that reaches back to wisdom literature. So in Proverbs 3 we find a father speaking to his son, and he wants him to win at life, and so he tells him:

**Blessed** are those who find wisdom,  
 those who gain understanding...  
 her ways are pleasant ways,  
 and all her paths are **peace**.  
 She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her;  
 those who hold her fast will be **blessed**. (Proverbs 3:13;17-18)

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<sup>1</sup> Outline adapted from Tim Keller <https://gospelinlife.com/downloads/creation-care-and-justice-5393/> (Accessed August 10, 2022)

The father here says if you find wisdom you will be blessed and you will walk the path of peace. And that's because God's world is built on God's wisdom.

So, if you want to be blessed and at peace scientifically, then you need to find God's wisdom because God's wisdom says stuff like 'respect gravity because if you don't then you won't be blessed.' You can stand on this.

Or if you want to be blessed and at peace relationally then you need to find God's wisdom because God's wisdom says the ways you treat people lead to results you can count on.

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I wonder, are there any husbands here who have figured out that there are things you can do to make life good? Are you picking up what I'm throwing down? Like it's one thing to kiss your wife as you run out the door to work, and it's another thing to kiss that girl in a way that makes your kids dry heave. And these actions lead to different places.

God designed all of this. The world runs on laws. And all these laws don't just exist at random but rather God has woven the world together into a beautiful fabric. And the Hebrew word for the perfection of this fabric is shalom – it's the blessed life.

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So, Shalom does mean peace; but it's not just the sound in the house before the kids start fighting. That's the absence of chaos which will soon be remedied. Shalom is when everything in life comes together in the right way.

So when you are young and your body looks good and you are healthy that's shalom. But when you hit midlife and beyond; and your elbow hurts all the time; and your skin doesn't do anything when you use Oil of Olay, this is shalom breaking down. And ultimately when you die this is the breaking apart of shalom. All your cells come apart and stop functioning as a whole.

Emotionally it's the same thing. If you are content, and all the things you care about are in a line and working the way they should, you are in shalom. But when you've got desire beyond your reach. Maybe you want something that you shouldn't have, but you pursue it anyway. All of a sudden you start unravelling. That's when anxiety and conflict enter the picture. That's when you get angry.

And communities and families work this way. When everyone is at peace and taking care of each other your community is flourishing. If anyone needs something someone steps up. That's abundant life. That's shalom. But when community breaks down and disagreement breaks in, then crime rises and shalom dissipates.

So shalom is when all of creation – all of life – is weaving together and working the way it was designed to work. And wisdom is recognizing that God made the world to work this way and bringing our lives in line with it; we are weaving ourselves into the fabric of God's shalom.

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So the wise brother doesn't sneak up on his sister and spray her in the face with the cat spray bottle because the social fabric of the family will unravel and he will get kicked in the shins. That's a proverb from the Hoffman family.

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But how does justice run together with this? Well here it is: justice is working to bring the world back to shalom when it starts unraveling.

So just one practical snapshot: Today there are 7000 children in the foster system in BC. 2000 have long term foster homes but 5000 are continually in need of a temporary foster family when they can't live at home. 4000 of the kids in the system are under the age of 15.

These are little people living in situations where shalom has broken. The fabric of their worlds has unraveled. And justice happens when someone steps in and uses their resources and abilities to restore shalom in some way. Justice is the act of restoring the fabric of God's world to the way He designed it to be. This is what justice means in Proverbs and throughout scripture. So if you are taking notes, what is justice? It is working to restore the fabric of God's shalom anywhere it has begun to unravel. Now who does this?

Well here Proverbs gives some incredible insight. It says:

When the righteous prosper, the city rejoices;  
when the wicked perish, there are shouts of joy.  
Through the blessing of the upright a city is exalted,  
but by the mouth of the wicked it is destroyed. (Proverbs 11:10-11)

So there are two groups of people being described here – the righteous and the wicked. And Proverbs is describing two different scenarios- we'll just look at one of them.

So in the first scenario righteous people are rising to the top of society. They are prospering and growing successful. They are gaining influence in the city. And the city loves it – the city rejoices. And that's because through the righteous the city is being blessed and exalted. So what's a righteous person? What is righteousness?

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Well "righteous" isn't a word we use much today, but like "the fear of the Lord" that we looked at last week, righteousness is another word that gets thrown around lots in scripture and finds its root in Israel's wisdom tradition.

So Proverbs tells us what righteousness is. And what we find is that a righteous person isn't someone who hardly ever sins and is passionate about the rules. That's not righteous because nobody would be happy if that guy gained power. He would constantly be calling out the imperfections he saw around him.

This guy says stuff like "Mom, Jaxon didn't put his bowl in the dishwasher." If that guy flourishes the city doesn't rejoice. But that's not Proverb's definition of righteous.

Instead, it's something totally different, and this blew me away. Hebrew scholar Bruce Waltke says, "the righteous person is willing to disadvantage themselves to advantage the community." They take on cost to themselves in order to take care of the people around them.

So it makes total sense why the city would rejoice when the righteous flourish. Because when they climb to the top, and gain power and influence, they use their positions to bless the city. That's righteous.

Wickedness, on the other hand, is the act of disadvantaging the community in order to advantage yourself.

So righteous people are those who use the resources and influence they have to pursue justice; they help people who are suffering from the unraveling of shalom.

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Now hold onto that and let me take you to the New Testament. Jesus says:

For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:20)

The Pharisees were legalists who kept all the rules and called people out for falling short while not lifting a finger to restore shalom. And Jesus looks at them and says "God isn't a rule keeper, He's a people keeper." And God's kingdom is for those who are like Him. They disadvantage themselves to advantage their community. And the Apostle John says:

If you know that [Jesus] is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of Him. (1 John 2:29 ESV)

So justice is the act of working to return the world to the state of shalom God created it for, and the people who work to make this happen are the righteous.

So ask yourself "Is this me? Is this us? Are we righteous? Is our attitude, "I want to make Prince George a great place to live. I want to make it. I want to prosper and do well and get to the top of my field. And I want this because I want to use my position and power to do justice and re-weave shalom into this city." Is that you? Is that us?

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Now, I'm proud of our church. We are really seeking to grow here. We've dedicated a significant portion of our budget to making a difference in PG. But for sure there is more we can do together, and there is more each of us can do as individuals.

And so hear me, if you want this, but you recognize you aren't nailing justice, Jesus isn't hoping you'll feel guilty. That's not what Jesus is about. Rather Jesus wants to empower us up to become like Him. Jesus is the ultimate righteous man who disadvantages Himself to advantage the community and He wants to fill us.

So the correct response isn't guilt about what you aren't doing, but the desire to grow in righteousness. So how do we do this? How do we become righteous?

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Let's go back to The Sermon on the Mount. "Unless your righteousness surpasses the Pharisees you won't enter the kingdom of heaven."

Jesus isn't saying "the way to get to heaven is to do justice. If you help the poor God will accept you." Jesus isn't saying that. But He is saying "you can tell whether you've got a relationship with God by the way you treat the people around you."

And this is because when a person has an encounter with God, God changes them. God always comes to us first – that's grace. So it's not about earning His approval. But when we get saved by God's grace it does something in us and we start acting differently than we did before. And the result is that you can tell whether you have been saved by Jesus' grace because the passions that Jesus has start growing in your heart and changing the way you act.

Now this doesn't mean that you are perfect, but it does mean that Jesus' perfection is infectious to those around Him.

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John Newton, who wrote "Amazing Grace" once said: "I am not what I ought to be, I am not what I want to be, I am not what I hope to be in another world; but still I am not what I once used to be, and by the grace of God I am what I am."

So have you met Jesus, and are you seeking to get to know Him more? Maybe you haven't been following Jesus at all, but you want to. If that's you then you need to submit yourself to Him and pray "Jesus, become the boss of my life; change me so I look like you." We all have to start there.

But maybe you've already done that – so then are you giving yourself to getting to know Him more? Are you feeding Jesus to your soul? We're going to go to communion in a few minutes, and communion pictures this – it pictures us feeding Jesus to our souls because we want His grace to fill us and flow from us to the world. We want to become more like Jesus.

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So justice is working to restore shalom anywhere we see God's world not working the way He designed it to work. And righteous people pursue this; they use their resources and abilities to build up their community. And we grow in justice as Jesus fills us more and more.

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Now, finally, one thought on why it works this way. In Proverbs God says:

Whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker,  
but whoever is kind to the needy honors God. (Proverbs 14:31)

God says I've got a connection with the poor and the needy. God loves all His children, but He is uniquely close to the thirsty, the homeless, the parentless and the prisoner. And His connection is such that we can touch His heart by touching them.

So on Judgment Day Jesus will say to some:

Come, you who are blessed by My Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave Me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave Me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited Me in, I needed clothes and you clothed Me, I was sick and you looked after Me, I was in prison and you came to visit Me.' (Matthew 25:34-36)

The people that Jesus says this to are people He has changed, by His grace, to look like Him. So we don't get there by digging deep within ourselves to muster the strength to serve the poor and the needy. We get there by falling in love with the God who became poor for us.

Friends, Jesus was born in a manger. He spent time homeless with nowhere to lay His head. His last meal was eaten in a borrowed room and He was buried in a borrowed tomb. And He wasn't just poor, He was oppressed. He was abused and murdered. And ultimately He died a thirsty prisoner, naked on the cross.

And He did this for us. Jesus did this for me! He disadvantaged Himself to advantage me when I didn't deserve anything good at all. And He did the same for you.

So do you love Him? Do you even know who He is? If you do, do you love Him? And are you giving yourself to growing to love Him more?

Brothers and sisters here's the thing: people who love Jesus love what He loves. And Jesus gave His life to restore shalom to our broken world. Jesus loved this world and so He gave it the church. And this means that while issues of homelessness and addiction and parentlessness are incredibly complicated; and while our world is full of injustice some of which has been perpetrated in His name – the people Jesus has filled with His Spirit see the undeserved grace He has extended to us, and respond by pouring His love into His world.

So do you see how much Jesus loves you? And is it changing you to love what Jesus loves?