Just God

Week 1: Where's the Justice?

I. It's always fun to start a new series of messages and that's what we're doing! The series is called:
[Slide]: Just God

A. That's one of those phrases that carries a double meaning. It could mean God at the exclusion of all else. That would be a good series of messages, but that's not the direction of this one. We're using "just" as a characteristic of God. The God who is just. The God who executes justice.

1. We live in a culture that speaks and craves justice, and this is a good thing. It's a godly thing in fact. God takes the matter of justice seriously, and Old and New Testament alike point us to the reality that God is a God of justice. And yet it's a term that conjures up many varying opinions and convictions. As Christ followers, what do we do when the torrent of cultural currents begins to rise, and men's wisdom saturates crucial conversations? Conversations like those currently occurring around justice? If we're wise, we make it our aim to bend our lives to the book.

2. The Old Testament book of Habakkuk is a well spring of wisdom as it pertains to the justice of God. It's the theme of the entire book! A cry for justice is always received by God's attentive ear, but His methods for executing justice are in a realm we cannot fully comprehend.

a. Why?

I'm not God and cannot give a comprehensive answer. I do feel confident saying this much though. We live in a world that has always attempted to categorize people as either a victim or an oppressor, when in reality that line splits right down the middle of every human heart. We must pursue justice on God's terms and the good news is that He speaks abundantly on the matter.

B. Let's turn to Habakkuk 1 and feel free to listen when I read the Scripture in a moment, but if you'd like to locate Habakkuk, it's between Nahum and Zephaniah. It's only 4 books from the end of the Old Testament.

1. We don't know much about the man Habakkuk, but a lot of information is available surrounding the context in which Habakkuk wrote. For our purpose, as modern-day readers, that's far more important if we are to understand justice from God's point of view.

a. We're dealing with the late 7th Century B.C. and we can narrow the book of Habakkuk even tighter to just before 605 B.C. That is because 605 B.C. is the well attested date of:
[Slide]: The Battle of Carchemish

(1) The Battle of Carchemish was between the Babylonians (also known as the Chaldeans) and Egypt resulting in a new global power. The Babylonians are now in charge and Judah, the only remaining portion of Israel, will be transferred over into the hands of the Babylonians. It's a rough few decades for God's people with the supreme blow coming in 586 B.C. of the temple's destruction.

b. Habakkuk is a contemporary to Jeremiah and the book also falls within the events mentioned in 2 Kings 23 and 24. Let's take a quick little road trip through the Old Testament to get a grip on what Habakkuk is so distraught about.

(1) One of the last kings to reign over Judah before it fell into captivity was King Josiah. He was a righteous king who cleaned house on a culture that did right in their own eyes. God used King Josiah as an instrument of His justice. You cannot pursue social justice as a culture and be a culture that celebrates doing what is right in their own eyes! Those two objectives are inherently opposed! When King Josiah cleaned house, the people balked at it. The priests refused to go to Jerusalem and instead stayed home and threw a fit! When King Josiah refused to form an alliance with Egypt, Neco, the Pharoah, had him killed.

2 Kings 23:30 [Slide]: 30 From Megiddo his servants carried his dead body in a chariot, brought him into Jerusalem, and buried him in his own tomb. Then the common people took Jehoahaz son of Josiah, anointed him, and made him king in place of his father.

2 Kings 23:32 [Slide]: 32 He did what was evil in the LORD'S sight just as his ancestors had done.

(2) Josiah's son, Jehoahaz, didn't even have time to get his new bedroom furniture ordered from IKEA before he got the boot. He only lasted 3 months as king before he was replaced by his brother:
[Slide]: Jehoiakim

(3) Jehoiakim decided to do what God had commanded against doing and that was to form an alliance with Egypt.

2 Kings 23:35 [Slide]: 35 So Jehoiakim gave the silver and the gold to Pharaoh, but at Pharaoh's command he taxed the land to give it. He exacted the silver and the gold from the common people, each according to his assessment, to give it to Pharaoh Neco.

2 Kings 23:37 [Slide]: 37 He did what was evil in the LORD'S sight just as his ancestors had done.

Be careful who you follow, because those that we submit to begin to mold the character of our lives. The common people clamored for a king after Josiah, and it wasn't long before they were suffering injustice at the hands of that very king.

(4) Was this just? No, the king was exacting taxes from the very people who had the least and he didn't take into account the situation of the people. He determined to make his own assessment.

(5) Was the injustice that occurred in Judah strictly top down? No, the line between victim and oppressor splits right through each human heart. 2 Kings gives us a context for the political leadership of Habakkuk and Jeremiah gives us a context for the social situation of Habakkuk.

Jeremiah 7:9-11 [Slide]: 9 Do you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, burn incense to Baal, and follow other gods that you have not known? 10 Then do you come and stand before me in this house that bears my name and say, "We are rescued, so we can continue doing all these detestable acts"? 11 Has this house, which bears my name, become a den of robbers in your view? Yes, I too have seen it. This is the LORD'S declaration.

There is systematic injustice from the leadership and there is social injustice that has permeated all aspects of the culture to which Habakkuk speaks. And it all stems from the injustice they (and we) have dished out toward the all-knowing, all present, all-powerful God! The society of Habakkuk was deteriorating as people abused one another all week long, chased after their gods, and then showed up on Sunday with arms open wide ready for a blessing from the LORD. The greatest injustice in that scenario isn't human to human, it is our injustice toward our gracious God!

2. Now that we have a context, we can dive in the deep end of Habakkuk. I know I haven't given a definition of terms, like justice, and I've done that on purpose. I want us to let the Scripture speak for itself. Here we go!

Habakkuk 1:1 [Slide]: 1 The pronouncement that the prophet Habakkuk saw.

a. This prophetic word is amazing!! The Hebrew word Habakkuk means to "embrace" but not an affectionate embrace. We have some wrestlers in TabYouth and they embrace their opponent, but as one who clings. Habakkuk is one who wrestles with God when it comes to His ways, and if I had to sum up Habakkuk and how God chooses to execute His justice it would be this: [Slide]: Journal of A Confused Preacher

b. God will give a word to Habakkuk to impart to His people, but it's going to come from a conversation with God (we call that prayer) and it's a verbal wrestling match. There are things that really frustrate all of us. The worst thing to do is to hide that from God! He's big enough to handle all emotions, even frustration. If there are things about this world that make us mad or angry, lay those things at the feet of the Lord and ask for wisdom. Just remember that God's wisdom doesn't necessarily have to equate to an answer. Sometimes it's the faith to trust Him in the confusion and unknown.

Habakkuk 1:2-4 [Slide]: 2 How long, LORD, must I call for help and you do not listen or cry out to you about violence and you do not save? 3 Why do you force me to look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrongdoing? Oppression and violence are right in front of me. Strife is ongoing, and conflict escalates. 4 This is why the law is ineffective and justice never emerges. For the wicked restrict the righteous; therefore, justice comes out perverted.

c. Habakkuk is looking at the society around him and he's gone to the Lord time and time again. He hasn't seen God respond in the way that Habakkuk expected Him to respond. Habakkuk is questioning if God is seeing what he's seeing? The symptoms are right in front of Habakkuk and he can't understand God's inaction.

3. What are the symptoms of a society that seeks to do what is right in their own eyes? Habakkuk identifies six different terms that indicate justice is broken: Violence, injustice, wrongdoing, oppression, strife, and conflict.

It's an irrational and illogical pervasiveness that's taken over the culture and when that happens the law becomes ineffective.

a. There is a moral framework that has to undergird any legislative system, or they just become empty words on an irrelevant document. The word that's translated ineffective comes from the idea of paralysis. When an arm becomes paralyzed, it has ceased to operate in its intended way. When the law becomes paralyzed, the inevitable outcome is:
[Slide]: Suppressed Justice

b. Justice comes from the Hebrew word "mishpat." The idea is to give someone what they are due. When we consider that phrase, we likely think of it in terms of retribution. Someone has wronged me and they need to get what is due. But remember the context of Habakkuk considering 2 Kings and Jeremiah. People were being exploited and in response were exploiting others! Leaders were manipulating their authority to satisfy their own ends. And the moral degradation took root in the entire society.

c. As we journey through Habakkuk over the next few weeks, I'd love for us to have a more robust understanding of biblical justice. Why do we stop in our understanding of justice to be retributive? Many times in the Old Testament the word "mishpat" is combined with the word "tzadeqah." "Tzadeqah" is the word from which we get "righteous." We tend to think of righteousness in a pious or religious sense, but the essence of the word is doing right by God and others. "Mishpat" standing alone gives us the idea of giving people their due and when combined with "tzadeqah," makes it unquestionable that a proactive justice should also be in mind.

4. Let's break it down. Every human being from the moment they are conceived in their mother's womb is endowed with an undeniable quality that makes every single one of us invaluable in the eye's of God. That being, we are created with the imago dei or the image of God baked into our DNA! Therefore, there are certain rights that everyone is due: respect, dignity, love, and compassion. We are commanded by God throughout Scripture to:
[Slide]: Do justice!

a. To be equitable in our relationships with others, doesn't mean that everything will be fair. It does mean that I'm going to determine that in my dealings with you, I'm going to treat you with the same level of respect and dignity that I would like you to treat me.

Matthew 7:12 [Slide]: 12 Do to others as you would have them do to you.

b. It's a hard command to live out but simple to grasp. Habakkuk is crying out to God because he realizes that doing right unto others is extremely difficult when the wicked are in charge. Justice becomes perverted. That's a word that means something designed with good intent, becomes twisted or bent. A society that has twisted justice, becomes a difficult situation for the righteous to live, but there's never a free pass for us to negate what God has instructed us to do.

5. So, what do we do?

a. We do what Habakkuk did and we cry out to God that His justice would manifest. I don't want to give too much away, but God will hear the pray of Habakkuk and God's response will surprise Habakkuk.

b. So as we begin the conversation on justice, I would strongly suggest that those of us who are Christ followers begin by searching our own heart.

C. Remember when we began, we said that our initial response to the idea of justice is to put ourselves in the victim category and others in the oppressor category. The reality for us all is that ~~that~~ line divides each of our hearts.

1. If you're not a Christ follower, part of you is a victim and part of you is an oppressor. Both parts of you need the healing touch of God's grace made available through Jesus Christ. And He extends that to you today.

2. For all of us, we bend our lives to the book by being a people committed to: do justice.
We do justice by giving people what they're due!
[Slide]: We do justice and give others the justice due!

a. People are to be held accountable. Tough love is love. But we give people what they are due, namely the dignity that is inherent to every human as one made in the image of God!

b. Where's the justice? God always holds people accountable to injustice, particularly if it has to do with those that are marginalized: the unborn, the immigrant, the widow, the child, etc. God is no fool. We

should stand for justice and cry out to God like Habakkuk. We should also make it our aim to do justice. To give others their due.

3. This verse comes from Micah but it's one of my favorites:

Micah 6:8 [Slide]: 8 Mankind, he has told each of you what is good and what it is the LORD requires of you: to act justly, to love faithfulness, and to walk humbly with your God.

II. Over the next few weeks, we're going to have a raw look at the justice of God. Habakkuk will take some surprising turns and how God chooses to execute His justice might shock us. He does in fact see it all and His faithfulness always holds true. Even when we don't get the answers we like in the moment.