



Webs Not Walls

Week 5: God is Just

Brian Mattson - 09/13/2026

I live in a one-TV house. That was pretty common when I grew up, way back in the 90s. TVs were expensive back then, if you can even remember the last millennium. Some of my friends had old TV sets in a basement or in the kitchen, which felt like a real luxury. Now you can buy a brand new television as tall as I am for a few hundred dollars, which kind of makes me think our technological advances aren't working on the right things, but I digress. You see, when you live in a house that has one TV and two kids, things can get pretty unfair pretty quickly. Sometimes it's a race between Jack and Dorothy to get downstairs first on the weekends so they can pick what to watch first.

And as Jess and I saunter down later in the morning, or worse, woken up in an "emergency" before our alarms have gone off, we hear the familiar refrain from one kid or the other: "Jack's been watching TV for ever and won't let me pick," or "Dorothy just wants to watch Bluey or Spider Man or Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles," depending on the day. In so many words, one kid will complain about the other and it all boils down to the idea that things are not fair. Obviously, if you are the one benefiting from having control of the remote or more screen time, things are just fine, no injustices here, thank you very much. Life doesn't feel unfair when you are the one benefitting, does it?

We defuse the situation by listening and then determining the best course of action, which is usually some sort of compromise, and order and justice are restored. In extreme cases, we may have to threaten our kids with emptying the dishwasher or picking up a bucket of walnuts in the back yard, and once *those* options are on the table, compromise usually happens quickly.

It's not just the injustice of unequal TV time that kids understand. They see it out the window of the car or hear it on the news. It's wonderful and challenging to live with two elementary age kids, because they are quick to point out injustice, and often quicker than we do. Perhaps it is our years on earth that have jaded us or blinded us or dulled the heartbreak for our fellow man, but kids point it out straight away. No suppressing those things when you've got kids around. They have a strong radar for injustice, unfairness, or just plain wrong when they see it. They can sense when something is off. I'm sure they are wondering *what is anyone doing to right these wrongs?* Here's Meredith Miller:

Since kids are aware of what is wrong in the world—they see injustice—they wonder if God is going to make it right—to bring justice. Does God see? Does God care? Most of all: What is God going to do about it?

- Meredith Miller

They see it. We see it. Surely God sees it, right? It's not just kids who ask those questions. We all ask those questions if we're being honest. We wonder, *Why doesn't God just fix it?* That would be nice, wouldn't it? It would sure save a lot of time, effort, and stress. But if justice is a key characteristic of God that we can attach our web of faith onto—and we affirm that it is—what does God's justice look like? What does it sound like? What does it feel like? If God is just, what exactly are we talking about?

Repeatedly in the Old Testament—more than 400 times—the word appears. Our English word *justice* comes from Latin and means fair, equitable, or

upright. Straight, not crooked. Rarely do we see straightness in nature. Trees don't grow straight. Rivers don't flow directly from A to B. Our veins twist and turn inside our bodies. Almost nothing is straight out in the wild. Justice is something *humans* are trying to bring about. Here's Bible scholar, Tim Mackie:

It's a human project—the creation of a just community... It actually is unlike anything in the universe... We all want it. If it's going to happen, it's going to be something humans create. The natural trajectory of human relationships is not towards justice. At least human history has not shown that to be the case. There has to be some active force or choice or value system or story driving people to live unnaturally.

- Tim Mackie

Like Christians around the world, we believe the Bible is the story of God, and captures the relationship between God and humanity. That's where we get our first clues about God's justice. And over and over again, we find that God is concerned with people experiencing justice and equity. It's one of the characteristics that sets the Hebrew people apart from other near-East people groups. Part of their ethos is to embody righteousness, fairness, and justice within their community *and* to outsiders. From the very beginning, the people are tasked with living by a different set of values. And as this special group of people keep messing things up, God continually intervenes to reset the order.

Most notably, God's justice is showcased in the Exodus story. The Hebrew people were oppressed, enslaved, and abused by the Egyptian rulers and God moved to set things right. To restore the Hebrew people. The story, though it has some uncomfortable bits, is less about Egypt's punishment, and more about restoring God's people. Our modern minds hear the word justice and immediately think about courtrooms, lawyers, and judges. People who get what they deserve. In its most basic sense, a law or rule is broken

and then a punishment fits the crime. Equal weight. That's justice in the judicial sense. That's not the kind of justice characteristic of God. In God's courtroom, justice is restorative rather than retributive. God's justice works in tandem with a few other attributes. In what may be the most famous verse dealing with justice in the Old Testament, the prophet, Micah, says:

He has told you, O human, what is good, and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God?

- Micah 6:8

This well known verse comes after a lot of prophetic talk about God being upset with the higher echelons of society. Just a few verses before, Micah says this:

Listen, leaders of Jacob and Israel: Don't you know anything of justice? Haters of good, lovers of evil: Isn't justice in your job description? But you skin my people alive. You rip the meat off their bones. You break up the bones, chop the meat, and throw it in a pot for stew.

- Micah 3:1-3 MSG

Ouch. These are some strong words from God. Micah goes on to call out the prophets and preachers along with the wealthy and powerful for their oppression, injustice, and corruption. They have grown their riches and increased their land at the expense of the poor, the widow, the orphan. God is not using these strong words to put people in their place. God is calling out systems of oppression and the abuses of power by those who were to be trusted protectors. Consistently in scripture, God shows concern for the quartet of the vulnerable—the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the foreigner. There are even laws in place—Deuteronomic laws—meant to protect and ensure the equity for the marginalized in the community. This is, again, why the Kingdom of God was so different—it was a radical

reorientation of the societal structure. And when injustices, especially to those groups occur, God's strong words come out. And when that's not enough, God makes an appearance to remind the people.

When Jesus came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed."

- Luke 4:16-18

Jesus goes on to embody, not only God's love, but God's justice. And when those in power decide their individual empires are more important than equity, look out. As Meredith Miller says, Jesus gets "big mad" at this kind of injustice, and knocks over some tables.

It was passover and people went to Jerusalem from all over. It was a time for the people of Israel to remember their deliverance from slavery in Egypt. Part of this festival was an offering at the temple, and if you didn't bring one on the pilgrimage, there were always merchants exchanging money for doves, sheep, and cattle. That would be normal in ancient Israel, except over time, these merchants started charging extra, adding more burdens to poorer people. As Meredith Miller says in her book, "Worship had become a business, and an unjust one at that." So how do you think God feels about this? What do you think Jesus does about it? Here's what happens in the Gospel of Matthew:

Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. He said to

**them, “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer,’
but you are making it a den of robbers.”**

- Matthew 21:12-13

Indeed, Jesus was big mad. We don’t read about this kind of visceral reaction from Jesus often. He was angry, but for all the right reasons. Here’s Meredith Miller:

What’s important—critical—about Jesus’ anger was the source. He was mad about something God should be mad about. It’s important for God to have a deep, emotional reaction to injustice; the alternative implies God accepts it.

- Meredith Miller

Again, this was God, through Jesus, using strong words. Not specifically at people, but at practices. Making money off the poor. Maintaining a grip on power by claiming God’s favor. Adding to the *injustice* instead of furthering God’s justice. Micah explained what it looks like: do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with God.

The Hebrew word translated as justice is *mishpat*, and the key to remember here is that it’s paired with mercy and humility. God’s justice is not just an eye for an eye in a retributive sense. No, God’s justice is preemptive and restorative. And God can get pretty heated when the wealthy and powerful abuse those on the fringes of society. But those strong words aren’t reserved for us to give us shame. There are enough people who think that is what God wants. Instead, with people who are hurting or struggling, I see Jesus use gentle words.

For a long time, churches have said things similar to *sin makes God mad*, but Meredith Miller wants us to ask *What about sin makes God mad?* She asserts that the story of scripture reveals clear themes: Injustice, oppression, the hoarding of power and money at the expense of others. These are the things that make God mad and, thus, Jesus turns over tables. Jesus uses strong

words. But with us, those hurting, or on the outskirts of society, Jesus uses gentle words. That's because God cares about the kind of community we are building together—a just one—more than our personal shortcomings.

That doesn't mean our individual actions are not needed, or do not matter. That might be the excuse we give ourselves, but you and I don't get a pass when it comes to injustice. Still, we shake our fist at God in frustration—just like the Psalmists long ago—and wonder where is this God of justice? *If you love these people who are hurting so much, get busy and fix it already?* And as much as we would love God to show up and fix it, that's not God's plan. *We* are God's plan. Set aside in creation, different from all other animals, to foster a community where God's justice reigns. Mishpat—justice that comes from a place of mercy and humility. Many of the psalms using the word 'justice' aren't talking about what humans do, but rather who God is and what God does, rooted in the Exodus story. God heard the groaning of the oppressed Israelites, and set them free, and now you and I are imbued with that same quality. And I wonder after saying all this if I'm doing enough to speak up. Is our church doing enough? Have I just become content and comfortable with the way the world is because it's working for me? Is it time for me to use more of my own strong words?

It's hard to see God's justice in the world when we look around. War, famine, oppression, greed. Perhaps we have grown comfortable with watching from a distance. Justice—restorative justice—is inconvenient. It takes time and effort. It seems impossible to tackle, but it doesn't have to happen all at once. Maybe it's just baby steps at first. So if you or your family are looking to get a little mishpat in your lives, here are some easy suggestions.

- There's a Pizza Night at Millsap Farm on September 25th to support Abide In Love and their work with immigrants in our community.
- Go see Jesus Christ Superstar in October presented by Mosaic Arts Collective, which gives voice to minority artists.

- Give or volunteer at Crosslines through one of their many ministries helping homeless women, foster families, the hungry, and impoverished.
- Support the work of APO and the GLO Center as they help our LGBTQ neighbors find healthcare and support.

You can find links to all these events and organizations at the QR code in the bulletin. Sometimes to see God's justice, to hear what it looks like, we have to get a little closer to it. Near enough to smell it and feel it. I know it's a lot easier and comfortable to make sure our kids get equal time in front of the TV. But we aren't called to an easy way of life. To seek justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God means other people's problems are my problems too. That's what loving my neighbor like myself means. We use our strong words to speak up for our neighbors when things aren't right, just as Jesus did. And we save our gentle words to draw people close, healing what was hurt. In both ways, I trust God to be present, pushing us forward to live unnaturally, in a just community, that honors all of God's people.