

“Do you hear the call?”
Isaiah 1:1-20

Introduction: Pg. ____

Where were you when you saw the murder of George Floyd on the streets of Minneapolis? Most of us will take those gut-wrenching images to our graves.

That’s certainly true for me.

I was sitting in my backyard, taking a quick work break to check my text messages, when I clicked on a link that immediately displayed the horrifying video of Derek Chauvin, a white Minneapolis Police Officer, with his knee bearing down on the neck of this handcuffed and helpless black man, FOR NEARLY 8 MINUTES. Over 20 times, George Floyd, pleaded with the officer: “I can’t breathe.” And yet unconscionably, Chauvin still did not remove his knee for another minute and 53 seconds, after George Floyd took his final breath.

Floyd’s murder served as a tipping point for the nation. His name, tragically stands beside the names of: Breonna Taylor (as cries for justice ring out from Louisville, KY this week), and Ahmaud Arbery, and Philando Castile, and Eric Garner, and Tamir Rice, and Michael Brown, and Trevon Martin and many, many more.

His death helped me see: when it comes to the eradication of racism, we are not as far along as you think we are.

His death helped me see: I need to live differently. I have to be better, as a man, as a friend, as a pastor, as a follower of Christ. This moment helped me see, as my friend James Roberson (Pastor of Bridge Church in Brooklyn), talks about: there are 4 different hearts, not 3. Let me explain...

4 Different Hearts

1. **Racist:** Racists believe their group is superior, and that black people are inferior. Racism is a system of ideas and practices that pushes down one race to elevate another.
2. **Racially Indifferent.**
 - Racially indifferent people say: “That’s not really my problem, and why are we talking about black and white, anyway? We should be all color-blind.”
 - Racially indifferent people often turn a blind eye to opportunity gaps and inequalities.
 - As Bryan Loritts says: “A **racially indifferent** Christian is an oxymoron. It is a contradiction of terms.”
 - That is why most of us probably fall into the category of...
3. **Racial Reconcilers**
 - Racial reconcilers say: “We need more equality. Let’s create harmony and unity.”
 - After all, people from every nation will fill heaven, so let’s make our churches and homes look like that, but sadly, the unstated message is often: “Let’s come together, as long as you come into my white space.”
 - Racial reconcilers can be great, but it’s not enough to stay there.
 - We must get beyond the 3rd heart to the 4th, to the place where we’re doing the work of an...
4. **Anti-Racist**
 - Anti-racists work to expose & dismantle racism wherever it exists. They are not okay with the racist comment of a family member or coworker, nor do they ignore the injustices of the massive racial disparities like the wealth gap and mass incarceration.
 - They most clearly live the God-given mandate to: **SEEK JUSTICE.**

That’s what this series is all about: “SEEK JUSTICE!”, as we consider “Racism and the Fierce Urgency of Now.”

The question I want to ask you today is simply this: Do you hear the call?

Some Acknowledgements

- #1) I am a white man. Not only am I not the most qualified person to speak about racism, I enjoy more cultural privilege than any other demographic in the room. Moreover, while I always seek to love my black friends and people of color, I will never truly understand your pain. This is what Proverbs 14:10 means when it says: “The heart knows its own bitterness, and no stranger shares its joy.”
- #2) What is communicated in this series will probably not be strong enough for some, and may feel too strong for others. My goal is to help us wrestle with God’s heart for racial justice from the Scriptures in our cultural context.
- #3) I welcome your feedback. Why? We’re on a journey... the best way to journey is to journey together.

Some Encouragements for us All

- Listen with humility. Ask God: “How do you want to change me?”
- Listen with a heart ready to change. Ask yourself: “What’s my next step?”
- Listen with love as we consider these sensitive issues, especially toward our Black and Brown brothers and sisters. They carry a different burden, a different kind of heartache, a different level of exhaustion.

So where are we going in this series?

- Next week, we are going to learn to lament together.
- In week 3, we are going to have an insightful discussion with one of my Pastor friends and the Executive Director of the Boston Collaborative, Jua Robinson. Few people see what is happening in the city of Boston at a ground level, better than Jua.
- Then, we will conclude by considering Jesus’ mission as the bringer and restorer of justice.

Today, we are going to turn to Isaiah 1:1-20 as we hear God call us to: “Seek Justice!”

The first two weeks will help heighten our awareness and acknowledge our sin. The final two weeks will help propel us to accountable work and action [to borrow a framework from Pastor Eric Mason of Epiphany Fellowship in Philadelphia and author of *Woke Church: An Urgent Call for Christians in America to Confront Racism and Injustice*].

Read Isaiah 1:1-20

1. Seek justice to reflect God’s heart of justice (1:1-9).

Verses 1-9 serve as an indictment against the people for turning away from God. They lost their devotion. They had gone astray.

Check the seriousness of the situation.

- Verse 2: Their rebellion was so great, that God calls heaven and earth as a witness against them.
- Verse 4: The entire nation is characterized as sinful. Their rejection of their Father God was not localized but a border to border issue. God describes them as weighed down with iniquity and guilt, corrupt dealers, who have forsaken and despised him, though he is the “Holy One of Israel.”
- In verses 5-6: God says, I took you to MGH and you are sick from the top of your head to the soles of your feet.
- This is why they faced the strong discipline of verse 7-9.

- To put this in perspective, he compares them to citizens of the most immoral cities Sodom and Gomorrah. WOW.

But what is at the root of all of this? I believe the answer is found in *verse 3*.

What was their greatest error? They stopped looking to God. They failed to truly *know* him. The Septuagint (Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures) reads: "Israel does not know me." They didn't share his vision. They were not about what he was about.

And as the rest of the chapter reveals: they looked super religious but did not share God's heart for justice. When he calls them to cleanse their hearts, he says what? Verse 17. "Learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause."

But... What is Justice?

- Justice is essential to God's being. Over and over, the Bible tells us: God is just.
- The key Hebrew and Greek terms from which we derive the word "justice" occur over 1000 times! (*Little Book of Biblical Justice*, Marshall, 10-11)
- To give you a simple definition... **Justice = Setting things right**
 - Justice can be retributive (paying the consequences for wrongdoing) or...
 - restorative (helping the vulnerable and oppressed by correcting wrongs done to them).

To better understand God's heart for justice, listen to these words:

- **"For I the Lord love justice" (Isaiah 61:8)**
- **"Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; steadfast love and faithfulness go before you." (Psalm 89:14)**
- **"but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the Lord." (Jeremiah 9:24)**
- **"He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8)**
- **"But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." (Amos 5:24)**

You can hear how the ideas of justice and righteousness so often go together.

- Righteousness refers to right relationships between people (treating each other rightly).
- Justice occurs when relational wrongs are made right. Again, justice is setting things right, restoring the dignity, equality, and wholeness of our relationships.

T: All of this is rooted in God's original design for our world.

[[For more see: *The Justice Calling* by Bethany Hoang & Kirsten Johnson) & *Little Book of Biblical Justice* by Chris Marshall]]

Genesis 1-3, the opening chapters of the Bible provide the foundation for our understanding and pursuit of justice. They teach us that...

1. Every human being is made in the image of God. Consequently, all people share equal dignity and worth before him and one another.

2. We also learn that all of humanity comes from the same source: Adam and Eve. While there are thousands of ethnicities (a social group with common national or cultural tradition), there is truly only ONE RACE, the human race. Race is a social construct based on physical attributes.
3. God's vision and intention for us in the beginning was that of shalom, complete harmony and human flourishing leading to a life of joy and delight (Eden means "delight").
4. That helps us recognize injustice as the undoing of *shalom*. Only because we have turned from God's ways and against one another is it necessary to seek justice. When we seek social justice and do the work of anti-racism, we are after the restoration of shalom. Justice is a path to joy.

T: This is what God wants for us! Seeking justice begins by knowing God's heart of Justice.

2. Seek justice by choosing action over appearance (1:10-15).

From an outside perspective, these were the last people you would expect to be guilty of injustice. Surely, they would not oppress the poor, forget orphans and widows, and live with such a disregard of human dignity that their hands would be covered in the blood of violence.

After all, look at their *apparent* devotion to God...

- Their offerings qualified as generous (verse 11 says they were "a multitude!") They never missed church. (Verse 12)
- They made a big deal out of Christmas and Easter (verses 13-14). They were demonstrative and expressive in their worship (verse 15, "spreading out their hands.") . When it came to prayer, they were professional. (verse 15, "bring many prayers before him.") - I mean these people even came to Fire Nights!

Yet... God says, I am not impressed. Your worship is vain. It's empty. It's simply a show.

There was a huge disconnect between what they looked like on Sunday, and how they lived on Monday.

- As Isaiah 29:13 would say: They "honored God with their lips, but their hearts were far from him."
- They missed the maxim captured in Proverbs 21:3: "To do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice." Echoed by Jesus multiple times: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." (Matthew 9:13, 12:7)

Here's the point: Their apparent devotion was actually hypocrisy. True love for God always translates into loving the people around us. Appearance is NOT ENOUGH. True worship moves us to action, to seek justice, to pursue the life of an anti-racist.

The Complicit Church

When it comes to racism in America, the church has to own, that by and large we have been, not only on the wrong side of history, we have been on the wrong side of God's heart.

If you have any doubts about this, pick up Jemar Tisby's book, *The Color of Compromise*, (or watch the series available on Amazon Prime).

In his work, he helps us see how the church was complicit in perpetuating the racist culture that allowed, chattel slavery (treating people as property, ripping families apart, and putting brands on their backs), and the legalization of segregation (known as Jim Crow laws), and not propelling the work of civil rights, and now slow today in engaging in anti-racist work.

American Church History Reveals...

- Many of our "heroes," like Jonathan Edwards & George Whitefield, were slaveowners.

- Denominations were split and created for the preservation of slavery.
- And even people like Billy Graham, while he broke barriers, taking down ropes of segregation and inviting Dr. Martin Luther King to his crusades, did not accept the invitation to join King in his marches.

We have to ask how our silence is that much different than theirs, or at least ask, what would have made us different in that day?

Listen to these piercing words from Tisby:

“The failure of many Christians...to decisively oppose the racism in their families, communities, and even in their own churches provided fertile soil for the seeds of hatred to grow. The refusal to act in the midst of injustice is itself an act of injustice. Indifference to oppression perpetuates oppression. . . . Historically speaking, when faced with the choice between racism and equality, the American church has tended to practice a complicit Christianity rather than a courageous Christianity. They chose comfort over constructive conflict and in so doing created and maintained a status quo of injustice.” - Tisby, Jemar. *The Color of Compromise* (p. 14-17).

T: God, help us to get your heart, and choose action over appearance, and finally, to...

3. Seek justice with urgent love (1:16-20).

Look at these 9 commands in vv 16-17.

1. Wash yourselves;
2. make yourselves clean;
3. remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes;
4. cease to do evil,

Isn't God amazing!? He says, "In spite of you rejecting and running from me, I'm inviting you to return. Come back! Change! I'll give you another chance!" That's what he's saying to us today, in every area, and specifically the areas of moving from racial indifference to be a racial reconciler to doing the work of anti-racism.

What does the change look like? Command #

5. learn to do good; (WHAT DOES DOING GOOD LOOK LIKE? WHAT WAS MISSING?)
6. seek justice,
7. correct oppression;
8. bring justice to the fatherless,
9. plead the widow's cause.

What do we need to do today as the church, as Redemption Hill Church?

- Examine your heart. Confess. Repent. (We're going to take a deeper look at this next week)
 - Racism is demonic.
 - Protests erupted in all 50 states and even left our shores to other nations at the death of George Floyd, but there must be a protest that erupts in our hearts.
- Learn.
 - This will not happen with one sermon, one conversation at Group, or by reading one book.
 - We're going to share a resource list this week via our newsletter and social media.

- What you are going to discover or perhaps learn more deeply, is that racism goes WAY beyond police brutality (and this series is not about bashing the police, not at all). Racism creeps into relationships, families, organizations, schools, health care, the judicial system, public policy, and yes, churches. That is why you hear people talking more and more, not just about individual racism, but systemic racism. It's baked in to the policies and procedures that advantage one group over another.
 - To give you a taste of what you will learn about racial disparities: the wealth of the average white family is 10 TIMES GREATER than that of the average black family. Is that mere coincidence. Is that because white people work harder or make better choices? Please! Enough is enough.
 - In Boston, one study showed the average wealth of a white family is \$247k to \$8
- Take urgent action from a changed heart.
 - There is no doubt the desperate nature of their depravity, as well as the force of these 9 commands coming in rapid sequence, all communicate a sense of urgency.
 - We can't wait to begin taking steps in our homes, in our workplaces, in our communities.
 - Dr. King's words at the March on Washington in 1963 still ring true: "We have also come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of now. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism."
 - It's time to take our theology and our do-olgy to Urgent Care, to allow the Great Physician to heal us!

"Justice too long delayed, is justice denied."

Conclusion:

To move in the direction of justice is to move in the steps where Jesus is already marching. (HT: Hoang & Johnson, *The Justice Calling*, 31)

Do you hear the call today? It's not enough to be a racial reconciler, and it's certainly not okay to be racially indifferent is sin. We must...

The Point: Seek justice by reflecting the anti-racist heart of God.

PRAY.