

# “Character that Counts: Righteousness”

Amos 5:24; Jeremiah 9:23-24; Matthew 25:31-46 <sup>1</sup>

Μακάριοι οι πεινωντες και διψωντες την δικαιοσυνην οτι αυτοι χορτασθησονται.

“*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled*” (Matthew 5:6).

Today we come to the fourth Beatitude, “*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled*” (Matthew 5:6). The New Living Translation uses “justice” in place of “righteousness,” and it doesn’t take much research to discover that the Bible frequently treats “justice” and “righteousness” very nearly as synonyms.

As one example of this, the most familiar verse in the book of Amos affirms God’s intent to “let **justice** roll on like a river, **righteousness** like a never-failing stream” (5:24). And in our text in Jeremiah, God says, “*Let not the wise boast of their wisdom or the strong boast of their strength or the rich boast of their riches, but let the one who boasts boast about this: that they have the understanding to know me, that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, **justice** and **righteousness** on earth, for in these I delight,*” declares the LORD” (Jeremiah 9:23-24).

Now I suspect that many of us here this morning secretly think that we do reasonably well with this “righteousness” thing, though it would of course be unseemly to say so. Here we are at church fairly early in the morning in the middle of the summer, after all! Max Lucado has suggested that we church folks tend to think to ourselves, “Well, I’m not perfect, but I’m better than most folks. I’ve led a good life. I don’t break the rules. I don’t break hearts. I help people. I like people. Compared to others, I think I could say I’m a righteous person.”

Lucado noted that “I used to try that on my mother. She’d tell me that my room wasn’t clean, and I’d ask her to go with me to my brother’s room. His was always messier than mine. ‘See, my room is clean; just look at his.’

“It never worked. She’d walk me down the hall to her room. When it came to tidy rooms, my Mom was righteous. Her closet was just right. Her bed was just right. Her bathroom was just right. Compared to hers, my room was, well, just wrong. She would show me her room and say, ‘This is what I mean by clean.’ That’s what God does, too. God points to God’s own character and says to us, ‘This is what I mean by righteousness.’”<sup>2</sup>

On the first Saturday in December each year, 2,500 of the world’s most brilliant students take what is probably the most difficult math test in the world. In this test, known as the Putnam Competition, students have six hours to answer twelve questions. Yet, though these are the very best young mathematical minds in the world, the median score is usually zero or one point. That’s right—*one point*, out of a possible 120.<sup>3</sup> As hard as that is to imagine, you and I face an even tougher and higher standard, the righteousness of God.

With all of the horror, disease, and warfare taking place around the world this summer, I suspect that many of us have been quietly grateful to live in the United States. While we’re being grateful, we do well to remember the admonition from Proverbs that “*Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin condemns any people*” (Proverbs 14:34).

Where does this righteousness come from that exalts a nation? It seems to me that a nation’s righteousness and its commitment to justice come from the righteousness and justice

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship of Columbia, Maryland on July 27, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Max Lucado, *Traveling Light* (Word, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Lev Grossman, “Crunching the Numbers,” *Time* (December 23, 2002), 51. See also [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William\\_Lowell\\_Putnam\\_Mathematical\\_Competition](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Lowell_Putnam_Mathematical_Competition)

in the lives and hearts of its citizens—which would be you and me, of course. So how do **we** gain righteousness?

The truth of the matter is that from the Garden of Eden onward, we humans have not been very eager to go about life in the ways that God intended (Romans 10:3). To the contrary, we've been very much about the project of trying to establish our own righteousness. We want to play by our own rules. Unfortunately, this has never worked, as events around our world demonstrate at this very moment.

In Romans, Paul reminded us that “*There is no one righteous, **not even one***” (Romans 3:10), and Isaiah affirmed that “*all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away*” (Isaiah 64:6). So where in the world can we gain righteousness? Actually, we can't gain righteousness “in the world” at all.

The Bible says that you and I are declared righteous because of our faith in Jesus, never because of our good deeds (Romans 4:5, 3:22; Revelation 7:14). The Bible tells us that there is nothing—absolutely nothing—that you and I can do to acquire righteousness except to admit that we need it and to ask God to give it to us . . . which God is most pleased to do on the basis of Jesus' sacrifice for us (Ephesians 2:8-9; 1 Peter 3:18).

So what is righteousness? Righteousness is the character of Jesus applied to us, declaring us to be forgiven, making us sons and daughters of God. And what does the character of Jesus accomplish in us? **The righteousness of Jesus causes us to make choices that lead to justice.**

When Jesus announced His purpose to His home synagogue, He said that God the Father had sent Him “*to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor*” (Luke 4:18-19; Isaiah 61:1-2). That's what righteousness looks like.

The prophet Isaiah wrote that “*The LORD's **justice** will dwell in the desert, his **righteousness** live in the fertile field. **The fruit of that righteousness will be peace**; its effect will be quietness and confidence forever*” (32:16-17). I'd say we could use some “righteousness that leads to peace” in our world today, wouldn't you? And that reminds me of the bumper sticker that says, “*If you want peace, work for justice.*”

As you probably know, from time to time there are some who try to have the words “under God” removed from the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag of our Republic. While you and I might object to such a change, I fear that many of us have already rewritten the Pledge of Allegiance in a more subtle way. Without really intending to, perhaps, we've quietly changed “with liberty and justice for all” to “liberty and justice for me.”

Left to ourselves, you and I tend to be focused on getting all we can, canning all we get, and sitting on the can. Caring for those whose lives are not so fortunate is frequently much farther down on our priority lists. It's easy to think that those problems are not our problems.

I suspect that most of you have heard of Emmett Till. Emmett was a fourteen year-old black teenager from Chicago who visited his relatives in Mississippi in August of 1955. Described by his friends as “slightly mischievous,” and unprepared by his northern roots for the realities on the ground in the South, Emmett took up a bet to speak to a white woman in a small-town store. Two nights later, Emmett was brutally murdered, after which his murderers were acquitted by an all-white, all-male jury, after which they freely admitted their guilt.

After the trial, Emmett's mother said, "Two months ago I had a nice apartment in Chicago. I had a good job. I had a son. When something happened to the Negroes in the South, I said, 'That's their business, not mine.' Now I know how wrong I was. The murder of my son has shown me that **what happens to any of us, anywhere in the world, had better be the business of us all.**"<sup>4</sup>

You've probably heard these words from Martin Niemöller, a German pastor imprisoned by the Nazis: "First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out, because I was not a Socialist. Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out, because I was not a Trade Unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out, because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me, and there was no one left to speak for me."<sup>5</sup>

As John Donne (1572-1631) put it long ago, "**Ask not for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.**" The suffering of others really is our business.

In Matthew 25, Jesus described what righteous people do, not in order to become righteous, but because His character is at work in them: they feed the hungry, they care for strangers, they clothe the naked, they visit those who are sick or in prison. What might such righteousness look like in the year 2014?

For starters, I think righteousness looks pretty much the same today as it did when Jesus spoke those words. Righteousness still looks like feeding the hungry, caring for strangers, clothing the naked, and visiting those who are sick or in prison. But I think that the justice that righteousness brings involves more than this.

From time to time I see a cartoon in which one character says, "When I get to heaven, I'm going to ask God why He allowed so much poverty and suffering in the world when He could have done something about it." The other character replies, "I'm not going to ask God that question." "Why not?" "**I'm afraid God might ask me the same thing.**"

Jesus was very clear that "*From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked*" (Luke 12:48). Righteousness does the right thing, the just thing, no matter how it affects us personally. This week I've wondered about the extent to which my own daily choices bear the fruit of righteousness.<sup>6</sup> Here are some of the things I've wondered about:

1. If you and I store up wealth for ourselves beyond any reasonable need rather than giving generously to organizations that alleviate pain and suffering in the name of Jesus, we allow thousands upon thousands of people to live and die in disease and squalor every year. *Do we really want to have to give an account for this?*

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<sup>4</sup> Lisa Cozzens, *Welcome to African American History: Emmett Till* (1997).

<sup>5</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First\\_they\\_came...](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_they_came...)

<sup>6</sup> As we've noted, righteousness has to do with character, and character is that which guides our behavior when we think no one is watching us. I try to be guided in such moments by what I call "the publicity test." This test grows out of what Jesus said in Luke 12:2-3: "*The time is coming when everything will be revealed; all that is secret will be made public. Whatever you have said in the dark will be heard in the light, and what you have whispered behind closed doors will be shouted from the housetops for all to hear!*" So, whenever I'm faced with making a "righteousness decision," I ask myself whether I would want my wife, or my children, or the Deacons, or any of the rest of you, to know I've done this. Most things become pretty clear in that light.

2. If you and I choose to watch movies & videos or read books & magazines or play video games that magnify violence, we bring about the creation of more violent products that affect the minds and hearts of thousands upon thousands of people, not to mention our own. *Do we really want to have to give an account for this?*
3. If you and I choose to watch movies & videos or read books & magazines or play video games that magnify sexual sin—I'm talking about pornography of every sort, which many consider to be the most pervasive moral issue eroding lives in the Church today—we bring about more sexual products that affect the minds and hearts of thousands upon thousands of people, not to mention our own. *Do we really want to have to give an account for this?*<sup>7</sup>
4. Companies in which you and I might invest are very skillful at hiding their involvement in tobacco, alcohol, gambling, pornography, abortion, usury and oppression of the poor, among many other life-damaging involvements. If you and I make financial investments without carefully investigating their “fine print,” we may aid and abet life-destroying enterprises without meaning to. *Do we really want to have to give an account for this?*<sup>8</sup>
5. Our nation sacrifices more of its children through abortion every year than the pagan nations of ancient Canaan ever thought of doing. *What are we doing*, individually and together, to provide compassionate resources and assistance for young women who face such agonizing choices? *What are we doing* to promote and encourage godly understandings of sexuality and marriage among young people whom we might influence for good?
6. Our community is full of “invisible” people: persons who have disabilities; persons who work in menial jobs; persons who don't speak English very well, if at all. *What are we doing* to discover, to befriend, and to encourage these forgotten ones? How are we using our educational power, our economic power, and our political power to bless them?

These questions could go on and on, and for some of them, there may be room for honest disagreement, but God has warned us that “*I will take the measuring line of **justice** and the plumb line of **righteousness** to check the foundation wall you have built*” (Isaiah 28:17, NLT).

The fourth Beatitude tells us that “*Blessed are those who **hunger** and **thirst** for righteousness, [and justice] for they will be filled*” (Matthew 5:6). As I'm sure you know, hunger and thirst are primary urges. When they're present, they force themselves on us until they're satisfied. And so the question I wonder about is this: do I really feel *hungry* and *thirsty* for righteousness and justice? Do you?

As a boy, Chiune Sugihara dreamed of becoming Japan's ambassador to Russia. By the 1930s, as ambassador to Lithuania, he was one step away from fulfilling his dream.

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<sup>7</sup> One fourth of all Internet searches every day have to do with pornography (<http://erlc.com/issues/quick-facts/por/>). A 2006 survey found that 50% of all Christian men and 20% of all Christian women report that they are addicted to pornography (<http://archstl.org/page/pornography-facts-background>).

<sup>8</sup> It's possible to avoid such involvements. GuideStone Funds, a Southern Baptist enterprise, does not invest in any company that is publicly recognized, as determined by GuideStone Financial Resources, as being in the liquor, tobacco, gambling, pornography or abortion industries, or any company whose products, services or activities are publicly recognized as being incompatible with the moral and ethical posture of GuideStone Financial Resources. <http://www.guidestonefunds.com/AboutUs/Values>

One morning a huge crowd gathered outside his home. Sugihara learned they were Jews who'd fled there from Poland, seeking Sugihara's help for Japanese visas that would permit them to escape the German Gestapo.

Three times Sugihara wired Tokyo for permission to provide the visas; three times he was rejected. Sugihara, a committed Christian, had to choose between his dream and the lives of these people. He chose to disobey orders. For the next 28 days he wrote visas by hand, barely sleeping or eating. Recalled to Berlin for his disobedience, he departed still writing visas and shoving them through the train window into the hands of refugees running alongside.

Sugihara was literally hungry and thirsty for righteousness, and his work saved 6,000 lives. Back in Japan, he was dismissed from the diplomatic corps, and he spent the rest of his life doing menial work. When his story was finally told, his son was asked, "How did your father feel about his choice?" "My father's life was fulfilled. When God needed him to do the right thing, he was available to do it."<sup>9</sup>

Whenever you and I pray for God's will to be done, we're praying for **justice** to roll on like a river, and **righteousness** like a never-failing stream (Amos 5:24). It will certainly be so at the End of Time, when God settles all accounts; **but it can be more so tomorrow than it is today if you and I choose steadfastly to do the right thing today.**<sup>10</sup>

And so, my friend, if you want to live out the fourth Beatitude, ask "**What would Jesus do?**" about every significant decision in your life. Wait until God grants clarity as to the answer, and then do that . . . no matter what.

**"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled"** (Matthew 5:6).

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<sup>9</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chiune\\_Sugihara](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chiune_Sugihara)

<sup>10</sup> The twenty-third Psalm says that God will guide us in paths of "*righteousness*" (23:3), and Peter told us that when God creates a new heaven and a new earth, they will be "*the home of righteousness*" (2 Peter 3:13).