

# *Just*



A JOURNEY INTO  
THE MERCY OF GOD

*by Brooke Jackson*

## ABOUT THE BOOK

*Just: A Journey into the Mercy of God* is a six-part study about God's heart for justice and what God's just character means for us as followers of Jesus. Readers will be asked to examine their own understanding of justice and then witness how Jesus demonstrates the mercy of God in his interactions with others. This study focuses heavily on the parables and miracles of Jesus and asks us to consider the ways Jesus's stories and actions reflect God's character and how his life compels us to be just toward others.

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*Just: A Journey into the Mercy of God*

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## DEDICATION

To my mom, Angela, for teaching me the value of integrity and showing me how to fiercely love the ones we are given.

And to Miles, Elias, and Olivia-Grace, I hope the world you inherit appreciates your beauty and that you always know how lavishly you are loved.

# *Table of Contents*

INTRODUCTION:

A JOURNEY INTO THE MERCY OF GOD .....10

**SECTION ONE: WHAT IS JUSTICE? ..... 22**

Section One: *Introduction* ..... 24

Part One: *An Eye for an Eye* ..... 30

Part Two: *When Justice Is Lost* ..... 36

Part Three: *The Coming Kingdom* ..... 42

Part Four: *The Spirit of the Lord* ..... 48

Part Five: *Justice and the Love of God* ..... 58

Section One: *A Prayer and Journaling Prompt* ..... 64

**SECTION TWO: GOOD NEWS TO THE POOR ..... 66**

Section Two: *Introduction* ..... 68

Part One: *Is the Kingdom Fair?* ..... 74

Part Two: *Gleaning Justice* ..... 80

Part Three: *Jubilee* ..... 86

Part Four: *The First to Throw a Stone* ..... 92

Part Five: *Who Will Love More?* ..... 98

Part Six: *Who Is My Neighbor?* ..... 104

Part Seven: *This Living Water* ..... 112

Section One: *A Prayer and Journaling Prompt* ..... 120

**SECTION THREE: SENT TO  
PROCLAIM FREEDOM AND RECOVERY ..... 122**

Section Three: *Introduction* ..... 124

Part One: *The Works of God Displayed* ..... 128

Part Two: *If You Are Willing* ..... 134





<b>SECTION SIX: GO AND DO .....</b>	<b>266</b>
Section Six: <i>Introduction</i> .....	268
Part One: <i>Faithful over Little</i> .....	274
Part Two: <i>The Resurrection of the Just</i> .....	280
Part Three: <i>Sheep and Goats</i> .....	286
Part Four: <i>Love Your Enemy</i> .....	292
Part Five: <i>Forgive and Forgive Again</i> .....	298
Part Six: <i>You Feed Them</i> .....	304
Part Seven: <i>Weep with Those Who Weep</i> .....	310
Part Eight: <i>Mercy over Judgment</i> .....	318
Part Nine: <i>A Just Way Forward</i> .....	326
Section Six: <i>A Prayer and Journaling Prompt</i> .....	330

<b>OPPORTUNITIES FOR JUSTICE PARTNERSHIPS ..</b>	<b>334</b>
<b>ENDNOTES .....</b>	<b>342</b>
<b>ABOUT THE AUTHOR .....</b>	<b>351</b>



*Just*

# *Introduction*

*A Journey into the Mercy of God*

# Introduction

## A JOURNEY INTO THE MERCY OF GOD

“This is what the LORD Almighty said: ‘Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor. Do not plot evil against each other.’”

*ZECHARIAH 7:9-10 NIV*

There is a series of viral videos on YouTube featuring eighty-seven-year-old Municipal Court Judge Frank Caprio in Rhode Island, who has earned internet stardom due to his compassionate verdicts for people who appear in his court for traffic violations. Some of the videos gained popularity because of their humor. He has an affable personality and engages in light banter with folks who appear in his courtroom. But many of his videos are heartfelt and emotional. In those hearings, he asks the people in front of him about their health, why they were in a hurry and forgot to pay a meter, or about their plans for the future. In doing so, he finds out about family illnesses, single mothers working multiple jobs, or folks missing a meter payment because of a job interview.

Judge Caprio is quick-witted, sharp, and discerns when someone is struggling. He often waives the fines and fees associated with a violation. He dismisses cases from time to time and frequently lowers the amount that a person owes the court. Sometimes he gives people money out of a fund he sets aside specifically for those in need. The relief is palpable. Some are awestruck, unbelieving, and emotional. Many cry. Often, they whisper a quiet thank you into the microphone as they exit the stand. It is an example of grace in a place where it is least expected. When asked why he chooses to run his courtroom the way he does, taking into consideration whether somebody is sick or had a death in the family or if they have children who are hungry, Judge Caprio says, “I don’t wear a badge under my robe . . . I wear a heart under my robe.”<sup>1</sup>

I work in the justice system every day, and even I get choked up seeing the impact of how this particular judge treats people who come to his courtroom. Caprio’s videos are an example of how justice and mercy can walk hand in hand. At one point, I did not always think those two things were compatible.

In the past, when I thought about God’s justice, I would think first and foremost of wrath. Full stop. My family faithfully attended church each week, and I attended Christian schools until college. I had great grades and could win competitive Bible verse games (known as sword drills) with the best of them. But I was absolutely terrified of God—and not in the positive God-fearing sort of way. When I considered God the Father, I thought of judgment and punishment. No matter how often I heard messages that God was

love, it was difficult to disentangle that idea from the harshness of my crime-and-punishment mindset. But one day during my personal Bible study, I came across this verse in Hebrews, and it flipped my entire idea of God’s character on its head:

[B]ut in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he also made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.

*HEBREWS 1:2-3 NIV*

The Son is the *exact representation* of his being. Despite having read these verses before, I had never allowed that portion of it to really sink into my understanding of what it meant about God’s character. God chose to speak to us through the life of his Son. And if Jesus is the exact representation of God’s being, then I can reliably look to Jesus to more fully comprehend God in relation to me and others better. It means we can trust that what we see in the actions and words of Jesus are what is true about the character of God the Father. And this applies across the board, whether you are looking to know God’s heart of love, his healing nature, or, for our purposes, his heart for justice.

Some time later, as I was trying to figure out my place in the world after school and seeking God’s face for what it was that I was supposed to do, this verse was strongly impressed on me: “Learn

to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow” (Isaiah 1:17 NIV). So I went to work for a place that defended those who had been charged with violating the law, particularly children. When asked in my interview how I would respond if family members asked me how I could represent people who had been accused of such horrible things, I told the panel that, as a follower of Jesus, my whole faith was based on the premise that I was saved by grace alone and that I am no better or different than those who I would be advocating for. In all honesty, I thought I would not get the job because of my answer; but God had other plans, and almost twenty years later, I am still there!

In this book, we will journey together into God’s heart for justice by looking at what Jesus said and did during his earthly ministry. We will pay particular attention to his parables and miracles. The stories Jesus told and the way he moved through the world faithfully embodied the character of God through and through—including what it means to know, pursue, and do the justice of God. And because Luke’s Gospel presents Jesus’s ministry through a justice framework, you will notice that we spend a considerable amount of time there.

My prayer is that this study will reveal to us God’s heart for people and his purposes for us. I hope it will challenge the notion of what we believe God’s justice to be and that we would be inspired to “act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with [our] God” (Micah 6:8 NIV).

## DEVOTIONAL STRUCTURE

This devotional is divided into six sections, each of which has several “days” of readings. As such, there is no pressure to complete it within a certain number of days or weeks. Feel free to move through the devotional at your own pace, especially if some days’ readings are more dense than others and you would like more time to think through the passages and questions.

## A NOTE ON PARABLES AND MIRACLES

Most days of this study have either a parable or a miracle of Jesus as their focal point. Why parables? The word parable is a transliteration, which combines two Greek words: *para*, which means “next to,” and *bole*, which means “to set.” Taken together, the words translate as “to set next to” or “to set alongside.”<sup>2</sup> The parables of Jesus are fictional stories about human experiences he tells alongside the reality of what is happening at the moment.<sup>3</sup> For example, when his disciples ask him who among them is the greatest, Jesus calls a child over to them and tells them they need to become like children. He then tells a story about the Father caring for the vulnerable (Matthew 18:1–14).

Jesus often uses parables to demonstrate the coming of God’s kingdom on earth. He uses parables to explain who God is, what he is doing in the world, and how we as his followers should live in light of him. Parables, by nature, assume an action on behalf of the hearers—that once a story has been told, people will respond. Modern-day neuroscience researchers have studied the impact



of storytelling by watching the parts of the brain that engage when people hear a good story. When we listen to someone tell a story, our brains light up in the same pattern as the speaker's, mirroring their words in a process known as “neural coupling.”<sup>4</sup> Multiple parts of our brains are involved in the listening process. Our brains release dopamine and cortisol, hormones that keep us engaged with the story and help us empathize with the people in it. Learning through storytelling helps us to retain what we hear more accurately. No wonder Jesus used this medium so often to illustrate a point!

Some scholars note that parables typically fall into one of three categories: 1) the surprising nature of the kingdom of God; 2) the ethics and upside-down values of God's kingdom; or 3) a crisis of decision.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, other scholars suggest that all parables are eschatological—related to the judgment of God and the souls of man.<sup>6</sup> Regardless of the category in which they fall, parables can help us understand the deeper meaning of our everyday lives, teaching us how to live, how to rightly prioritize people and things, how to ask the right questions, and how to remember lessons that we already know but may be hesitant to recall.<sup>7</sup> Where direct communication can result in people setting their defenses against the truth, parables—a form of indirect communication—find a subconscious way to allow people to confront their understanding of reality.<sup>8</sup>

And what about miracles? Miracles serve multiple purposes in the Bible. In addition to being personally meaningful for the

people who are connected to them, they also tell us a larger story about Jesus and the kingdom of God. For example, many of the miracles Jesus completed during his time on earth mirrored the miracles and wonders God performed for his people in the Old Testament. Feeding people, raising the dead, and healing the sick are all things God did by his own hand or through his prophets, linking Jesus and his miracles to God the Father.

The miracles of Jesus also allow us to see how Jesus drew near to people. And in his nearness, we learn so much! Early church father Augustine said of miracles:

Let us ask the miracles themselves what they tell us about Christ, for they have a tongue of their own, if it can only be understood. Because Christ is the Word of God, all the acts of the Word become words to us. The miracle which we admire on the outside also has something inside which must be understood.<sup>9</sup>

*AUGUSTINE*

By understanding the cultural context of the miracles Jesus performed, we see how Jesus broke social conventions to transform people's lives and draw them into a loving relationship with God. Many of Jesus's miracles involved him physically touching the ceremonially unclean or offering grace to sinners and social and religious outcasts (like the woman with the issue of blood) and sinners.<sup>10</sup> By introducing healing into such lonely and dry places, Jesus shows us a way to enact justice on the earth—by

being his hands and feet. It is in the miracles where we get to walk with Jesus alongside people who are in their deepest moments of suffering, pain, loss, and shame and meet them there. And much like his parables, the miracles Jesus performed evoked change in the people who experienced and witnessed them. I am hopeful that they will do the same for us.

### SPEAKING OF SUFFERING . . .

From the time we are children, we have an innate sense of when we have suffered an injustice. Whether it is a childhood slight on the playground or in the classroom or the deeper hurts of misunderstanding and betrayal that follow us into adulthood, we all know the longing for a wrong to be righted, a hole to be filled, or an injustice to be acknowledged. Sometimes, the injustices we experience or see in the world around us will cause us to question how God can be just when there is so much suffering, pain, and evil. It is a difficult reality and one about which I do not want to be reductive. Volumes could be written about whether it is possible to have a just God in the face of evil. In fact, countless philosophers and theologians have done just that. C. S. Lewis discusses this exact question in *The Problem of Pain*. It is not an easy task to reconcile God's just nature in a world riddled with inequity, genocide, war, and immense suffering, often dealt by the hands of other human beings.

This study will not focus on whether the reality of pain and evil negate the existence of a benevolent and just God. I do not believe

they do. Yet, the words required to do justice (no pun intended) to that discussion exceed the space we have here. Instead, this study will focus on the life of Jesus: how he lived out justice through his actions and teachings, how we can know God's character because of those actions and teachings, and how we can follow in his footsteps and live justly toward others.

As to the existence of suffering and pain, I will invite us all to hold on to these words from C. S. Lewis on the subject:

I have received no assurance that anything we can do will eradicate suffering. I think the best results are obtained by people who work quietly away at limited objectives, such as the abolition of the slave trade, or prison reform, or factory acts, or tuberculosis, not by those who think they can achieve universal justice, or health, or peace. I think the art of life consists in tackling each immediate evil as well as we can.<sup>11</sup>

*C. S. LEWIS*





*Section One*

# *What Is Justice?*

*Just: A Journey into the Mercy of God*

## SECTION ONE

# *What is Justice?*

“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:  
to loose the chains of injustice  
and untie the cords of the yoke,  
to set the oppressed free  
and break every yoke?  
Is it not to share your food with the hungry  
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—  
when you see the naked, to clothe them,  
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?  
Then your light will break forth like the dawn,  
and your healing will quickly appear;  
then your righteousness will go before you,  
and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.  
Then you will call, and the LORD will answer;  
you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.

“If you do away with the yoke of oppression,  
with the pointing finger and malicious talk,  
and if you spend yourselves on behalf of the hungry  
and satisfy the needs of the oppressed,



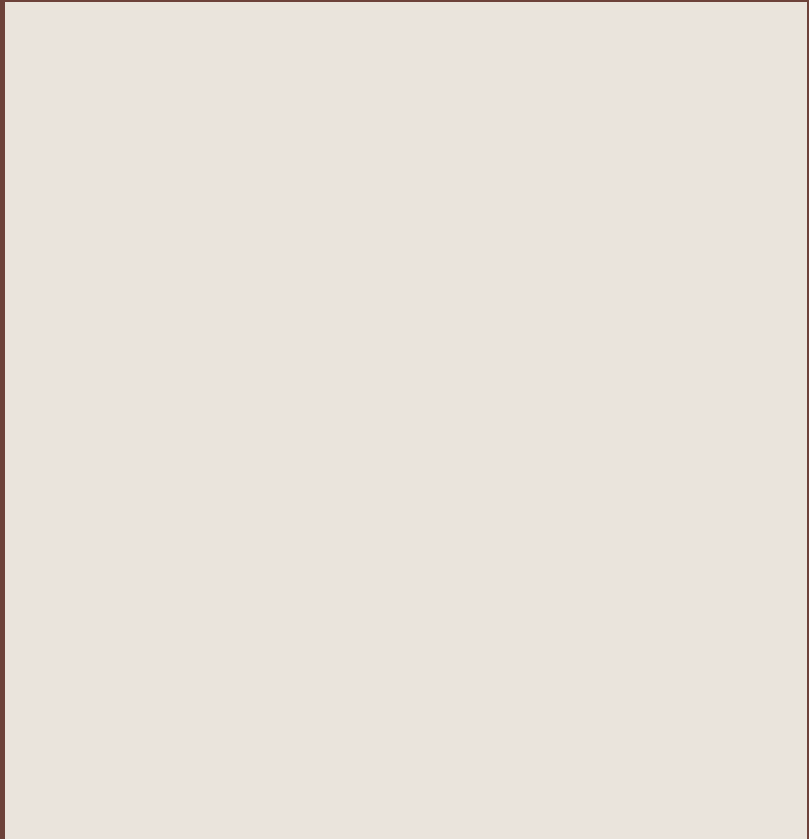
then your light will rise in the darkness,  
and your night will become like the noonday.  
The LORD will guide you always;  
he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land  
and will strengthen your frame.  
You will be like a well-watered garden,  
like a spring whose waters never fail.  
Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins  
and will raise up the age-old foundations,  
you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls,  
Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.

*ISAIAH 58:6-12 NIV*

From 1998 to 2019,<sup>12</sup> Urban Connections—a non-profit ministry on the near-East side of Columbus, Ohio—welcomed teams of youth groups to help with summer camps for elementary students and work on community beautification in the neighborhood. The teams would move into the ministry house, along with their youth pastors and chaperones, to serve for a week in a community outside their own. Each morning the volunteers would start with a devotion based on one of UC’s core principles: stability, justice, opportunity, and rich faith in Christ. For several years, I led the justice devotion. I would arrive while the teens were still rolling out of their sleeping bags and wiping the crust out of their eyes. Even with heavy lids and hungry bellies, they were polite listeners. Each year, I would start our time together with this question: “What does justice mean to you?” A brief lull of silence

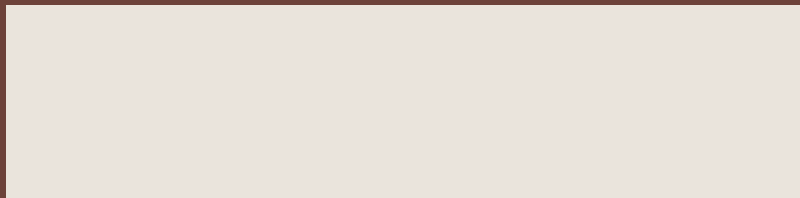
would always follow until the first brave person raised their hand to share.

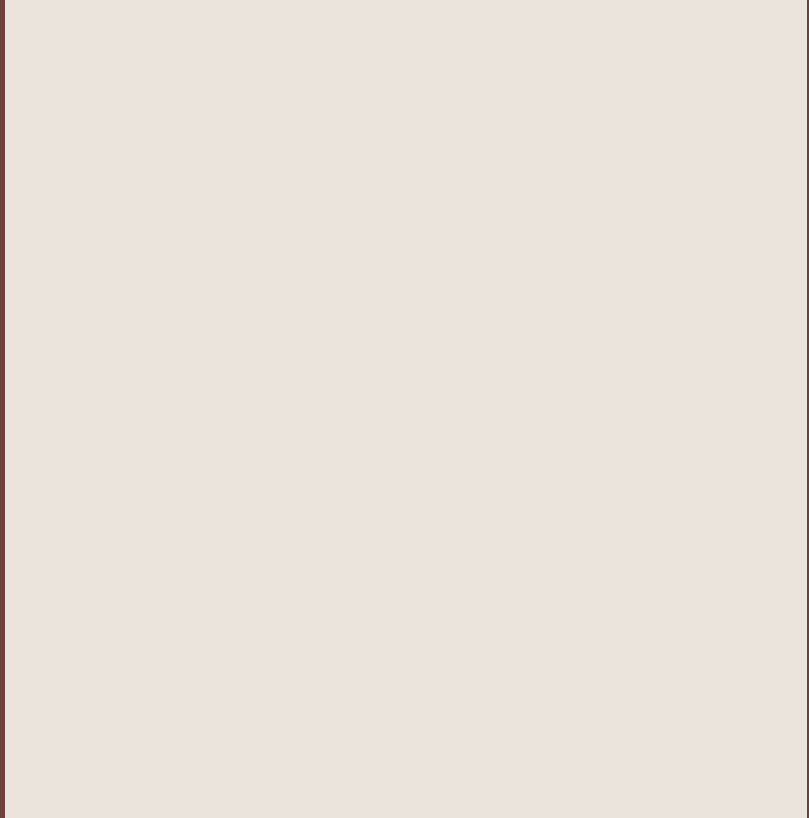
**And that is how we will start this journey together as well. Take a moment and answer that question below: What does justice mean to you?**



The responses the teens and young adults gave always varied. They would range from “getting punished for something you did” to “good triumphing over evil” or “an eye for an eye.” Very rarely would anyone say that justice included God’s love, mercy, or care for the poor. Yet of the four hundred times the Hebrew word *mishpat*, most often translated into English as “justice,” appears in the Old Testament, only a small percentage of those instances refer to retribution, or punishment for wrongdoing. The other nine out of ten times the word is used to denote restorative justice<sup>13</sup>—making someone whole or actively seeking out the vulnerable for the purpose of caring for, protecting, or advocating for them. Closely related to *mishpat* is the Hebrew word *tsedeqah*, which is translated as “righteousness.” It means being in a just or upright relationship with all people. And *mishpat* is how to create the ethical standard of *tsedeqah*.<sup>14</sup> The two terms appear frequently together in Scripture (see Job 29:14 and Ezekiel 18:5–19) and are often linked to the concept of caring for others.

**Take a look at the answer you wrote to the left and answer the following questions on this page and the next. Where did that idea come from? And what other things in your life helped shape your idea of justice?**





In this section, we will start our journey of discovery into God's heart of justice. We will see the coming of Jesus, the Holy One, bringer of justice, and light of the world. I pray we will see the Word with fresh eyes and soft hearts as we delve into what it means for God to be just, for Jesus to walk justly towards humanity, and how we can do the same.



# 1

## AN EYE FOR AN EYE

*Matthew 5:38–48; Leviticus 24:19–21; Luke 6:27–36*

But let justice roll on like a river,  
righteousness like a never-failing stream!

*AMOS 5:24 NIV*

For many of us, when the word justice is held up next to the word faith, it becomes synonymous with vengeance. For instance, take the phrase “an eye for an eye” and its related phrase “a tooth for a tooth.” Although these words, known as the *lex talionis* (“law of the talion”), do appear in the Levitical law (Leviticus 24:19–21), their modern-day recitation is often taken out of context. Contrary to popular thought, they were not given as an edict of what is required from one person who commits an evil against another (e.g., if you take my eye, I get to have your eye). Rather, the words were supposed to create a limitation on the retaliatory actions of the one who had been wronged. The *lex talionis* aimed at equity. The law set out parameters for responding to offenses, ensuring that revenge was proportional and not excessive. It created a boundary (e.g., if you take my eye, I cannot take your eye plus your arm, and a leg to go with it). But this is not how the law came to be applied. Instead of understanding it as a limitation, people began to treat it as a mandate (e.g., if you take my eye, I

*must* have yours). Jesus quotes this part of the Levitical law in his Sermon on the Mount.

### READ MATTHEW 5:38–48

Here, Jesus acknowledges the *lex talionis*, but flips its practical instruction on its head. Rather than *taking* what was permissible under the law, he says to *give* something. To offer not just a mercy, but a grace.

**What sticks out to you about how Jesus advises his followers to give something in these instances?**

In his 1873 sermon on the Beatitudes, Charles Spurgeon said this of Jesus’s instruction in Matthew:

The law of an eye for an eye, as administered in the proper courts of law was founded in justice, and worked far more equitably than the more modern system of fines; for that method allows rich men to offend with comparative impunity, But when the *lex talionis* came to be the rule of daily life, it fostered revenge, and our Savior would not tolerate it as a principle carried out

by individuals. Good law in court may be very bad custom in common society.<sup>15</sup>

*CHARLES SPURGEON*

By converting a limitation to a mandate, humans created a culture of vengeance. Jesus tells us there is a way that is different from the historical norm, yet more radical than what we may want. In fact, the whole Sermon on the Mount is full of instructions that seem opposite to what our nature may urge us to do. Jesus opens the sermon with a litany of opposites, calling people blessed who we would hardly see as such (Matthew 5:3–11), then he warns against the sins that occur only in the mind versus those accomplished by the body (Matthew 5:27–32). Jesus gives instructions on the proper way to fast, urges us not to be anxious (Matthew 6:16–34), and warns us not to judge (Matthew 7:1–6). And nestled among these instructions are the golden rule (Matthew 7:12) and how to pray (Matthew 6:5–13).

Jesus says it is through loving our enemies we become children of the Father. We become “perfect” as the Father is perfect by loving our enemies and going beyond what is asked of us for others (Matthew 5:43–45, 48). Here, the underlying Greek word (*teleios*) translated into English as “perfect” means “brought to its end, finished” or “wanting nothing necessary to completeness.”<sup>16</sup> It does not mean we are going to be mistake free! By telling us to love and turn the other cheek, Jesus urges us to be gracious and full of mercy. And in doing so, we become children of God. See



where this is going? If offering mercy and grace makes us more like the Father, then what does that tell us the Father is like?

## REFLECT

How has your perspective of justice impacted how you view God or your relationship with God?

How does reading Leviticus 24:19–21 as a limitation impact your understanding of it?

**Have you ever struggled to believe God is gracious and merciful?  
If so, why do you think that is?**

**What does today's reading tell you about the character of God?**



# 2

## WHEN JUSTICE IS LOST

*Isaiah*

So justice is far from us,  
and righteousness does not reach us.  
We look for light, but all is darkness;  
for brightness, but we walk in deep shadows.  
Like the blind we grope along the wall,  
feeling our way like people without eyes.  
At midday we stumble as if it were twilight;  
among the strong, we are like the dead.  
We all growl like bears;  
we moan mournfully like doves.  
We look for justice, but find none;  
for deliverance, but it is far away.

*ISAIAH 59:9-11 NIV*

About ten years ago, a documentary called *Kids for Cash* was released, exposing corruption in the youth legal system in Luzerne County, Pennsylvania. The film followed the cases of several kids whose lives were changed when they were committed to a private youth detention center following adjudications of delinquency in juvenile court. None of the youth in the film had attorneys to help them in their cases. Each of them repeatedly cycled in and

out of the local detention center for minor offenses that could have been handled in the community. Through home-based care and therapy, the teens could have remained in their homes for intervention and treatment.

The personal and financial interests of the judge sentencing the teens to the facility were the focal point of the documentary. He benefited by keeping the facility occupied. He and another judge received more than two million dollars in connection with the construction and maintenance of the facility; that information was never disclosed to the children who were sentenced to time there. The primary judge also failed to disclose the funds on his annual ethics reporting, as required by law. Both judges were charged, convicted, and sentenced to lengthy prison terms for the financial crimes they committed.

The long-term consequences for the affected children were even more dire. Some of the youth developed mental health disorders, including depression and social anxiety, while others became dependent on controlled substances following their commitments. Many did not finish school, and some lost their lives after the years of struggle triggered by their time in detention.

Justice is central to the heart of God. Each Old Testament prophet warns of God's judgment of those who treat others unfairly. In particular, the opening chapter of Isaiah begins by expressing God's displeasure with Judah and Jerusalem. God was tired of their festivals and rituals (Isaiah 1:14), their meaningless offerings

(Isaiah 1:13), and refused to hear their prayers (Isaiah 1:15). What made God so upset? There were a myriad of reasons: from taking bribes and flaunting sin to forsaking the Lord and rejecting God’s law, the people were full of rebellion (Isaiah 1:5) and given to corruption (Isaiah 1:4). This was the exact opposite of who God intended them to be.

Isaiah is full of contrasting couplings—instances where the prophet compares God’s hopes for Israel with its reality. The once faithful city was a prostitute (Isaiah 1:21) and instead of places where justice could be found, courts were places where rights were trampled (Isaiah 1:12). But, it was not just Judah and Jerusalem that received God’s critique. The prophet Isaiah pronounced judgment against Assyria, Egypt, Phillistia, Cush, Damascus, Babylon, and Moab too, for similar things. Frequently, the theme around which God’s anger flared was injustice.

**Read the following passages from Isaiah and take note of what injustices were occurring that displeased God.**

Passage	Injustices
<i>Isaiah</i> <i>1:21–23</i>	
<i>Isaiah</i> <i>9:13–16</i>	

Passage	Injustices
<i>Isaiah</i> <i>10:1-4</i>	
<i>Isaiah</i> <i>30:8-14</i>	

In light of all these evils, God promises judgment. The prophet records,

Therefore the Lord, the LORD Almighty,  
the Mighty One of Israel, declares:  
“Ah! I will vent my wrath on my foes  
and avenge myself on my enemies.  
I will turn my hand against you,  
I will thoroughly purge away your dross  
and remove all your impurities.  
I will restore your leaders as in days of old,  
your rulers as at the beginning.  
Afterward you will be called  
the City of Righteousness,  
the Faithful City.”

*ISAIAH 1:24-26 NIV*

Alongside the pronouncement of judgment, God promises restoration and redemption. Let's take a look at some of what Isaiah tells us about the coming Savior. Read the following passages and write out any observations you have about the Messiah and about God's plan to restore his people.

Passages	God's Plan of Restoration
<i>Isaiah</i> <i>9:1-7</i>	
<i>Isaiah</i> <i>11:1-5</i>	
<i>Isaiah</i> <i>41:8-10</i>	
<i>Isaiah</i> <i>56:1-9</i>	



## REFLECT

Before reading these passages, what did you think Isaiah was about?

How have these readings expanded your understanding of this prophet's book as it relates to justice?

From the Scriptures you have read today, what do you think Jesus has to do with justice?

What does today's reading tell you about the character of God?

# 3

## THE COMING KINGDOM

*Luke 1:1-56; Luke 2:8-14; Luke 3:1-20*

“I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the LORD Almighty. But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner’s fire or a launderer’s soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years. “So I will come to put you on trial. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive the foreigners among you of justice, but do not fear me,” says the LORD Almighty.

*MALACHI 3:1-5 NIV*

Growing up, I loved watching the Peanuts Christmas movie—the one where Charlie Brown finds the notoriously sparse, but ultimately redeemed, tree. My favorite part comes before the tree’s transformation. After Charlie unveils the tree and his

friends start laughing at him, Charlie tells a blanket-toting, thumb-sucking Linus that everything he (Charlie) touches is a disaster and that he must not really know the true meaning of Christmas. Charlie then yells across the stage asking if anyone can tell him the true meaning of Christmas. Linus assures Charlie he can, walks to center stage, illuminated by a spotlight, and solemnly but confidently tells the story of Jesus's birth. He quotes from the passage in Luke about the shepherds keeping watch over their flock by night while Jesus was born. He talks about the glory shining round about them and the shepherds being sore afraid.

“Fear not!” Linus quotes the angel, “for behold, I bring you tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people, for unto you is born this day in the city of David, a savior, which is Christ the Lord.”<sup>17</sup> I love that part. Great joy to all people—Jesus, coming in the flesh! The embodiment of Jesus has always been a vital aspect of my own faith. I am easily overwhelmed every time I think about Emmanuel—Jesus being flesh and blood and here, with us. I also love how the little tree ultimately becomes a beautiful part of the kids' Christmas. The film ends with Charlie joining his friends in song as he embraces the joy of the Christmas season. We see a longing for this same type of joy at the beginning of the Gospels.

The four hundred years between the last sentence of the Old Testament and the opening of the Gospels were filled with violence and religious upheaval.<sup>18</sup> The conquests of Alexander the Great were just the first of many shifts in social and political power that left Israel at the mercy of other nations, struggling

for personal and religious freedom.<sup>19</sup> So by the time the events of the Gospels occurred, the people of Israel were desperately longing for the coming King. The Messiah had been promised, and the time of his coming was almost fulfilled. But instead of a loud shout witnessed by the masses, the story of the coming King whose throne will never end (Luke 1:33) starts with visitations to a handful of family members, whose lives are about to change.

The angel Gabriel makes two appearances early in Luke's Gospel: first to a priest, and then to a girl. Both appearances come with the announcement of a birth. The priest is skeptical; the girl is curious. The priest's wife struggled with infertility; the girl is a virgin. The priest's son will be filled with the Holy Spirit; the girl's son will be conceived by the Spirit. Luke's storytelling device in these early chapters is known as "step parallelism," which allows us to read the stories of Gabriel's visitations in comparison to one another, distinguishing between the Messiah and the messenger to come before him.<sup>20</sup> For many followers of Jesus, this is a familiar story. But, I would like for us to read it with fresh eyes if we could.

**READ LUKE 1:1-38**

**What sticks out to you? Does anything surprise you?**

Next, let's read verses 47–56. For a moment, I would like us to consider what it must have felt like for Mary, a young teen, who is told by a messenger of the Lord that she will bear a son—and not just any son, but the Messiah. Did Mary question if she had really heard and seen the angel Gabriel? Who knows whether she doubted what had really happened? I might have! Yet as soon as Mary reaches Elizabeth, both Elizabeth and John (in utero) respond to the Holy Spirit, recognizing that what Mary had been told was true: the Messiah was coming and Mary had been given the honor of carrying him. I imagine that Elizabeth's proclamation in verses 42 and 43 was a balm to Mary, confirming what she had heard from Gabriel. In response, Mary extols the Lord for his faithfulness in what is known as the *magnificat*.

**Mary lists more than ten things that God has done for both her and his people. Write your favorites below.**

The next time we see Elizabeth's son John, he is proclaiming the coming kingdom and making way for the promised Messiah. Let's take a look at John's proclamation in Luke 3:1–20 together.

**READ LUKE 3:1-20**

**In verse 8, what does John tell the crowds to produce? What does that mean to you?**

**What (in verse 9) does John say is coming for those who do not bear good fruit?**

**The people in the crowd, including the tax collectors and the soldiers, ask John what they must do in order to avoid this outcome. He responds with a series of instructions. Take another look at verses 11–14 and write what John tells them below.**

## REFLECT

Look back at the list of things you pulled from Mary's magnificat. In what ways do those things point toward justice?

What do you think John's message to the people about sharing out of their excess, giving food to the hungry, dealing fairly with others, and only taking what is necessary has to do with Jesus, the coming King?

John is not the only one whose anticipation of the Messiah included themes of justice and righteousness. Take a look at Luke 2:22–39. What do Simeon and Anna prophesy about Jesus and his relationship to others?

What does today's reading tell you about the character of God?

# 4

## THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD

*Luke 4:14–30; Isaiah 61; 1 Kings 17:1–24; 2 Kings 5:1–14*

Yet the LORD longs to be gracious to you;  
therefore he will rise up to show you compassion.  
For the LORD is a God of justice.  
Blessed are all who wait for him!

*ISAIAH 30:18 NIV*

From the time he was a toddler, my oldest has been fascinated with the happenings of the sky. When he was in daycare, he would repeatedly sing a song about the planets. We could spend hours at the local science center with him in wonder as he learned about constellations and the lives of astronauts. One day when he was in the third grade, he came home very excited about the possibility of watching an eclipse that was just hours away. It was a rare complete eclipse known as the Beaver Moon. The last time it was visible was in the year 1440, and it would not appear again until 2669. So if he missed it, he would really miss it. He begged to stay up to see it. But knowing the wrath of a sleep-deprived child, we were unwilling to let him stay up past midnight. He sincerely wanted to experience something so rare, special, and memorable.

“It’s a once-in-a-lifetime chance!” he told us.



We compromised. Instead of staying up, we promised to wake him at 4:00 a.m. so he could see it when it was most visible in our part of the country. It would mean he had to wake up two hours earlier than usual. Did we feel like setting three alarms to make sure he would not miss it? Not particularly. But the moment was especially sweet. At 4:00 a.m., he jumped up, slid on some shoes, and came outside with us (he has not gotten up that easily since). It was a crisp November morning and the sky was clear. I hid my shivers long enough to snap a picture of him seeing the eclipse. It was beautiful—a small red-orange orb set against the deep blue sky. His broad, braces-filled grin will forever be etched into my brain. He was so delighted and so grateful to have not missed this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Anticipation can take many forms: the anxiety that can accompany the release of exam grades, the excitement that comes with expecting a new family member's arrival, or the nerve-racking wait that leads up to test results or a vital phone call. The expectant hope for the Messiah, however, was much different than our usual, modern-day waits. The coming of the King was the event for which the children of Israel had long yearned. Take a look at one of the prophetic passages about Jesus:

Behold my servant, whom I uphold,  
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;  
I have put my Spirit upon him;  
he will bring forth justice to the nations.  
He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice,

or make it heard in the street;  
a bruised reed he will not break,  
and a faintly burning wick he will not quench;  
he will faithfully bring forth justice.  
He will not grow faint or be discouraged  
till he has established justice in the earth;  
and the coastlands wait for his law.

*ISAIAH 42:1-4*

We have already seen Jesus tell his followers to turn the other cheek, to give more than was asked, and to travel farther with someone than requested (Matthew 5:38–48). In this way, we caught a glimpse of the upside-down ethic of how to respond in love when we may want to respond with vengeance or indifference. Today, we are going to look at one of Jesus’s first public statements of his purpose and its aftermath. However, before that and after his forty days in the wilderness, Jesus is received by the public. Read Luke 4:14–15 below:

Then Jesus returned to Galilee, filled with the Holy Spirit’s power. Reports about him spread quickly through the whole region. He taught regularly in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

*LUKE 4:14-15 NLT*

The ESV uses the phrase, “being glorified by all.” In other words, people like him—they esteem him highly and respect him and his teaching. Now, to our main Scripture for today.

**READ LUKE 4:14–30**

In a matter of moments, Jesus goes from being praised by everyone to being “mobbed” and forced to the edge of the city’s hill where the people want to throw him off the edge (Luke 4:28–29). But why? Well as it turns out, there are layers to his offense.

**Now, let’s look at the text Jesus was handed. Read Isaiah 61 in its entirety and take note of anything that sticks out as you do.**

This chapter of Isaiah tells of a future king who will bring justice when he establishes his kingdom on earth. It is a beautiful message of hope, redemption, and joy eclipsing heartache. Verses 1–2 are where we find much of Jesus’s recitation. When Jesus reads this portion of Scripture in the synagogue at Nazareth, he does not read it as it was written. He makes a few changes to it. That may not seem like a big deal to us; but to the audience, it would have been very significant.

Let's compare the two passages, side by side:

The Spirit of the sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. There will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendor.

*ISAIAH 61:1-3 (NIV)*

The Spirit of the Lord is on me because He has anointed me 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 (NIV)*

Isaiah 61 was a loved and highly revered portion of Scripture to this audience. Verse 3 in particular would have been the best part of the reading—the part that the hearers would have been anticipating: the promise of the coming Messiah, which many believed would result in the flipping of social norms for the children of Israel. Israel had been exiled, subservient, and treated harshly like second-class people by the rulers of the day. The coming Messiah would mean relief. But, Jesus does not read that verse.

Now by itself, leaving out a verse was not especially controversial. Around AD 200, rabbis composed an important collection of texts called the *Mishnah*. Though it was written well after the Gospels, it can give us insight into events that Jesus experienced. The Mishnah required the Torah to be read word for word, but scholars note that some verses of the prophetic books could be skipped as long as the interpreter could continue translation in a steady flow without having to pause.<sup>21</sup> Not only does Jesus leave out a verse, but he also inserts portions of Isaiah 42:7 and Isaiah 58:6 into his reading. When he completes his proclamation, he sits down. Luke tells us the people look “intently” (Luke 4:20 NLT) at him—maybe confused? Maybe waiting for more. Next, Jesus tells his audience the Scripture he has just read is being fulfilled right there in front of them. He identifies himself as the one to usher in this jubilee—he is *the* Messiah! To top it off, he recounts the actions of two great prophets in Israel’s history; instead of using them as the examples of heroic faith, he points to the people they interacted

with as the faithful ones. Let's dig a little deeper into who these two unexpected faith heroes mentioned in verses 25–27 are.

**READ 1 KINGS 17:1–24 AND 2 KINGS 5:1–14**

In Luke 4, Jesus references two of the greatest prophets in Israel. He highlights the people to whom these prophets were sent (instead of the prophets themselves), and he emphasizes that the miracles had been done for outsiders—a poor widow, her son, and a Syrian. Jesus says Elijah was *sent* to the widow and that Naaman was chosen out of all the lepers in Israel at the time. In both Old Testament accounts, the outsider took a step of faith, trusting what the prophet asked of them. They *believed* (even if Naaman's belief was begrudging). Considered together, all of these things may have contributed to the crowd wanting to throw Jesus off a cliff.

**Why do you think he chose to highlight the people he did?**

The widow, her son, and Naaman were all members of what biblical scholars call the “quartet of the vulnerable”—the poor, the immigrant, the widow, and the orphan.<sup>22</sup> They are the beneficiaries of the prophet Zechariah’s admonition to administer true justice (Zechariah 7:9–10 NIV). Jesus uplifts them in his proclamation about his ministry and mission. He proclaims justice and the year of the Lord’s favor (jubilee) while elevating people who were perpetually at risk of being marginalized. Jesus: full of the unexpected.

## **REFLECT**

**How has Jesus shown up in unexpected ways in your own life?**

**Have you ever wrestled with something Jesus said or did because it did not line up with your expectations? If so, what was it and why?**

**What is the potential danger of allowing our expectations to dictate what we think the Lord can do?**



**What does Jesus's announcement in Luke 4:18–19 mean to you?**

**What does today's reading tell you about the character of God?**

# 5 JUSTICE AND THE LOVE OF GOD

*Luke 11:37–52; Luke 6:20–36*

Decades ago (I cringe writing this), when I was still in high school, the church that housed our school was preparing for its annual Christmas program, which was a huge production. Hundreds of members, students and adults, had been rehearsing for weeks. There were quartets and choirs, bell choirs, and a play with live music and elaborate set designs. I was in a side room with classmates and other volunteers helping out before the program started, praying and watching the folks entering the church. We stood peering through the doors of the rooms where we were anxiously awaiting a mighty move of God. We were filled with the type of glee that can only come from teenagers who have not yet lived outside their parents’ homes or paid their own bills!

The sanctuary held thousands of people, and about thirty minutes ahead of the program, we were almost full. Busloads of students from other schools and other youth groups were there, scrunching together in the pews. A classmate pointed out a kid who looked to be about nineteen or so with a ten-inch tall spiked mohawk aflame with neon green, electric blue, and pink. My classmate said, with a severe amount of sincerity, “If there is someone out there who needs to hear the gospel, it’s that guy.” Everyone nodded and I

recall more than one person specifically calling him out in the prayer circle before the curtain call.

The program was great as usual, and we were equal parts ecstatic and humbled for the altar call. Extremely humbled. Because as it turns out, that 19-year-old spiky mohawk kid was a follower of Jesus already. He was a leader for his youth group and was one of the folks who had worked to pack his church's van full of others to come to the program. Insert sheepish grin here. Perhaps it was our underdeveloped teenage brains or a lack of depth in our theological training—or both. But we were collectively blind because we believed we knew what righteousness looked like.

As we read in Luke 4, when Jesus announces his ministry, he proclaims good news, freedom, recovery of sight, and jubilee. He uplifts the vulnerable as he does so and upsets his hearers to the point of revilement.

#### **READ LUKE 11:37–52**

This account in Luke is just one of many instances in which something Jesus says is different from what people expected.

**In this passage, what about Jesus's actions at the beginning of the meal surprises the Pharisee the most?**

Throughout Scripture, clean hands were important for avoiding sickness and disease, and they were associated with being ritually pure or having a clean heart. Perhaps Jesus does not wash before supper because he wants to have this exchange with the Pharisees. His response to their critique contrasts the cleanliness of their exterior lives with the grime of their interior ones. How could people who were so committed to external acts of piety that they tithed spices neglect justice and the love of God (Luke 4:42)? Jesus’s instruction that they should have practiced the latter without neglecting the former is a lesson for us, as well. The hypocrisy of people is a problem Jesus deals with throughout his ministry. He repeatedly challenges people for their failure to practice mercy and compassion for others alongside their worship. Jesus’s insistence on the value of caring for others was not new. Instead, it is consistent with who God is and has always been.

**Let’s take a look at what some of the Old Testament prophets say about how to treat others. Several of the minor prophets announce the Lord’s judgment against various acts of evil. Take note of what you observe in the following passages:**

Passages	Observations
<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Amos</i> <i>1:3-10</i></p>	

Passages	Observations
<p><i>Amos</i> 2:6–9</p>	
<p><i>Micah</i> 2:1–5</p>	
<p><i>Micah</i> 3:1–8</p>	
<p><i>Zephaniah</i> 3:1–5</p>	

In the same way God spoke through his prophets, Jesus condemns living with an outward showing of piety—observing the law in an empty way—while also mistreating others or ignoring their oppression. Instead, Jesus invites us to follow him to his upside-down kingdom, where the unexpected awaits.

## REFLECT

Why do you think the Pharisees missed the issues of justice and the love of God while trying their best to adhere to the rules of the law?

Take a few moments and consider your interior life—your thoughts and motivations—what do you think drives some of your own acts of righteousness?

Have you ever felt tempted to engage in outward acts of piety to be noticed by others? If so, what do you think motivated you then? If not, why do you think that can sometimes happen to otherwise well-meaning people?

What does today's reading tell you about the character of God?

SECTION ONE

# *A Prayer and Journaling Prompt*

What new things has the Lord taught you about justice as you have worked your way through this section?

Have any parts of this section been difficult to absorb? If so (or if not), why do you think that is?



Let's root ourselves with an intentionality about being open to learning more about justice, even if it is different than what we may have walked into this devotional with. Use the space below to write a prayer of your own. There are a couple of lines to help you get started.

*God of the unexpected. We know you are just and true. Open our eyes to see your handiwork and our hearts to accept your justice and mercy, however they come.*

## ENDNOTES

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- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Greg J. Stephens, Lauren J. Silbert, and Uri Hasson, “Speaker-listener neural coupling underlies successful communication,” *PNAS* 107, no. 32 (2010): <https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.1008662107> (August 14, 2023).
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- 6 Luise Schottroff, *The Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2006).
- 7 Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2014), 241. “Parables are designed to shake up one’s worldview, to question the conventional. If a manager can be dishonest, a tax collector righteous, a landowner generous enough to provide a living wage to everyone in the marketplace, and a judge neither God-fearing nor respectful toward the people, surely a widow can be vengeful.”
- 8 Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2008), 8.
- 9 Philip Schaff, editor, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series I, vol. 7 (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing, 1888), 256, quoting Augustine on the Gospel of John 24.2.
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- 11 C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 79.
- 12 UC continues to operate on the Near East Side of Columbus. In 2020, when large gatherings were halted, the ministry adapted to meet the community’s needs, focusing

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- 13 Jon Collins and Tim Mackie, *Biblical Themes*, video series, “Justice,” 1:22–3:20. Published October 17, 2017. *BibleProject*: <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/justice/> (March 28, 2024).
  - 14 Jon Collins and Tim Macke, “Justice Study Notes.” Published October 27, 2017. *BibleProject*: [https://d1bsmz3sdihplr.cloudfront.net/media/Study%20Notes/Justice\\_Study%20Notes.pdf](https://d1bsmz3sdihplr.cloudfront.net/media/Study%20Notes/Justice_Study%20Notes.pdf) (April 21, 2024).
  - 15 Charles Spurgeon, “The Beatitudes” (sermon, The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit, 1873). Published on July 29, 1909. [https://www.grace-ebooks.com/library/Charles%20Spurgeon/CHS\\_Beatitudes%20The.PDF](https://www.grace-ebooks.com/library/Charles%20Spurgeon/CHS_Beatitudes%20The.PDF) (March 27, 2024).
  - 16 “G5046 - teleios - Strong’s Greek Lexicon (niv),” *Blue Letter Bible*: <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g5046/niv/mgnt/0-1/> (September 25, 2024)
  - 17 *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, written by Charles M. Schulz, directed by Bill Melendez, aired December 9, 1965, on CBS, 21:00–21:11.
  - 18 Earl Crow, “Everyday religious questions: What happened during the 400 years between the Old and New Testaments?” Published January 29, 2016. *Winston-Salem Journal*: [https://journalnow.com/everydayreligious-questions-what-happened-during-the-400-years-between-the-old-and-newtestaments/article\\_280e6cc8-28fc-5bf1-a73f-97b680d5ab05.html](https://journalnow.com/everydayreligious-questions-what-happened-during-the-400-years-between-the-old-and-newtestaments/article_280e6cc8-28fc-5bf1-a73f-97b680d5ab05.html) (April 23, 2024).
  - 19 *Ibid.*
  - 20 Amy-Jill Levine and Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Luke* (New Cambridge Bible Commentary) (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 29.
  - 21 Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 155.
  - 22 Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 76.





### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brooke Jackson has been a public defender since 2006, advocating for children and teenagers in Ohio's legal system and representing them in state and federal court. She came to her work by being drawn into God's heart for the vulnerable and those in need. Brooke has been a follower of Jesus since she was a teenager, and while earning her degree in English (with a focus on creative writing), she was active in campus ministries, working with college students and leading and teaching through Bible studies, devotionals, and women's retreats. Brooke's career has made space for her to train faith communities on the intersection of faith and justice through a Christ-centered lens.

In addition to practicing law, Brooke teaches Juvenile Law to law school students, serves on a number of commissions and boards in her community that are focused on the legal system, and volunteers with a neighborhood nonprofit ministry serving kids in the city of Columbus. She and her husband Matt live in a historic neighborhood in near-East Columbus with their three children, Miles, Elias, and Olivia-Grace.

