

“Pursuing Justice”– Exodus 2:11-27

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[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions please contact Southern Oaks Baptist Church through their official website, www.welovethegospel.com.]

Great to see you. Meet me in Exodus 2...

[Introduction: CELEBRATION...CAUTION...CHALLENGE...]

One day, when Moses had grown up, he went out to his people and looked on their burdens, and he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his people.¹² He looked this way and that, and seeing no one, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand.¹³ When he went out the next day, behold, two Hebrews were struggling together. And he said to the man in the wrong, “Why do you strike your companion?”¹⁴ He answered, “Who made you a prince and a judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?” Then Moses was afraid, and thought, “Surely the thing is known.”¹⁵ When Pharaoh heard of it, he sought to kill Moses. But Moses fled from Pharaoh and stayed in the land of Midian. And he sat down by a well.¹⁶ Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters, and they came and drew water and filled the troughs to water their father’s flock.¹⁷ The shepherds came and drove them away, but Moses stood up and saved them, and watered their flock. (Exodus 2:11-27)

Between verses 10 and 11 there are a lot of years. Verse 11 says that “*Moses had grown up*,” but doesn’t specify his age. The New Testament actually tells us that he was 40 years old at this point in the story (Act 7:23). So there has been a lot of time elapse between those two verses. Decades, in fact. Just what experiences Moses had in those years is left to our imaginations. The only thing the New Testament says about that time is that he “*was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians*” (Acts 7:22). Beyond that we know nothing (unless you include Charlton Heston’s portrayal in Cecil B. DeMille’s *Ten Commandments* movie, which I would not).

It seems clear from verse 11, however, that he has awareness of his background (even if it’s only fragmented). The text describes him as going out to look upon “*his people*,” meaning the Hebrew people. This knowledge was probably solidified in those years with his biological mother, before he was returned to the Egyptian princess to be raised among the white collar Egyptians. So even at this point in his life he identifies with the Hebrews in some ways, though they certainly don’t identify with him. He’s been living as a prince. They’ve been laboring as slaves. They have hardly anything in common in their experience and this may have been what piqued Moses’ curiosity in the first place and prompted him to look in on their burdens.

When he does he witnesses something disturbing. An Egyptian was beating one the Hebrew people. So what does Moses do? The text says he looked to see if anyone else was around and then he intervenes and actually strikes the Egyptian down. He killed the man. Then he buried the dead guy in the sand. That’s the first scene.

Of course, that scene raises a number of questions. For example, was it Moses’ intention to kill the man? It doesn’t say. Before Moses attacks the man, the text does say that “*he looked this way and that*” to see if anyone was around and then gets involved when he sees that there are no other witnesses. That detail can be read charitably or cynically. Perhaps, if we give Moses the benefit of the doubt, he was looking around to see if someone else would help the victim and when he realized no one else would, he did.¹ Perhaps his

intention was *not* to kill the Egyptian, but inadvertently the force he used was too excessive. Many scholars point out that the word used for the Egyptians “*beating*” of the Hebrew is the same word used when Moses “*struck down*” the Egyptian. He was treating the Egyptian the same way the Egyptian was treating the Hebrew, only in Moses’ case “*beating*” rendered him guilty of murder. That act was illegal in Egypt. And, of course, later when Moses delivers the people and conveys God’s Law the action is just as reprehensible. Exodus 21:12-13 tells us,

“Whoever strikes [same word] a man so that he dies shall be put to death. ¹³ But if he did not lie in wait for him, but God let him fall into his hand, then I will appoint for you a place to which he may flee.”

So God’s Law will distinguish between intentional murder and unintentional manslaughter. Both are wrong, but each was handled differently. So any way you slice it, Moses has committed a crime.

On the other hand, if we read the text more cynically, the looking around before the crime could suggest premeditation. Maybe he was checking to see if there were any witnesses and he concluded that there were not so he acted in vengeance against the Egyptian and delivered the Hebrew. Even if murder was not his intention in the heat of the moment, let’s remember that Moses is a Egyptian Prince whose education and position the Bible tells us made him “*mighty in words and deeds*” (Acts 7:22). Could he not have put some of those words to use in this moment and commanded the Egyptian to stand down? Was force really necessary given his position in the land? Josephus, who was a Jewish historian, claims that Moses was a general in the Egyptian army. If that’s the case, then couldn’t he have commanded this man to cease and desist (especially if an Egyptian taskmaster was the culprit)? Of course, Josephus doesn’t have a reputation for being an accurate historian, so who knows?

In any case, his conscience was clearly eaten up by it as seen, for instance, in his cover up attempt, burying the dead man in the sand. Evidently he thought he got away with it because the next day we find him again looking in on his people and their situation. And, yet again, he witnesses an act of violence. This time it is one Hebrew abusing another. The same Hebrew word is used for the abuse. Once again, the sight of this bothers Moses so he steps in to settle the dispute. This time he uses his words. Did he learn from his previous confrontation? Did he view this as a different situation because it involved two of his own people? Who knows? What we do know is that there was clearly a guilty party and to him Moses directs this question: “*Why do you strike your companion?*”

The answer that comes back, in verse 14, was not the answer Moses was hoping for. “*He answered, ‘Who made you a prince and a judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?’*” Moses has no answer for the guy (although later he will when God gives him an answer in chapter 3). It really takes him off guard. Stephen explains, in Acts 7:25, that Moses thought that the Hebrews would have celebrated his previous action against the Egyptian. “*He supposed that his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand, but they did not understand.*” So this moment of is very counterintuitive for Moses. He’s expecting to be celebrated, but he’s being called out on the carpet. So Moses panics. He realizes his actions from the previous day are known. Verse 15 tells us that word of the murder actually comes to the attention of the Pharaoh himself. The text tells us, “*When Pharaoh heard of it, he sought to kill Moses.*” As a result, Moses flees to the land of Midian.

What a turn of events. All Moses wanted to do was help his people and next thing you know he finds himself all alone and on the run in the desert. That had to have been discouraging. He went from privileged prince to wandering exile in a matter of days. What would have been going through your mind if that was you? If it was me, I probably would have been tempted to just give up. I may have thought, “I guess that’s what I get for trying to be a nice guy. No one seems to appreciate it. That’s the last time I stick my neck out for someone who is getting taken advantage of because look at where it has led me. My good Samaritan

days are over.” But, fortunately, that’s not what Moses says. In fact, he finds himself in another situation where he witnesses an injustice and yet again he intervenes.

Verse 15 tells us he arrives at a well in Midian where he sits down to rest. Look again at what happens, starting in verse 16, *“Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters, and they came and drew water and filled the troughs to water their father’s flock. The shepherds came and drove them away, but Moses stood up and saved them, and watered their flock.”* So, once again, Moses sees some bullying happening, this time it involves some shepherds taking advantage of several women. Moses refuses to sit by idly while this is occurring and he stands up against the shepherds and they go their way. The women are rescued. And Moses even goes a step further and draws the water for their flock. And get this...they appreciate it! Now that’s more like it! Moses saves the day. Nobody ends up getting killed. There are lots of ladies that are appreciative of what Moses has done (as we will see in the next verses). And he puts some chivalry on display as he draws the water for these women. What a gentlemen...This is a turning point for Moses (as we will see next time), but it’s not the final turning point.

Let’s pause now and consider these verses as a whole. What do we learn from these stories? How does this speak into our lives and our situations? Actually I think there are a number of lessons here for us (most of which we will get to next time). Today, we’ll focus on just one and here it is...

How We Pursue Justice Matters

We learn something about Moses in these three scenes, don’t we? We learn that he is passionate about justice. He wants to right injustices and he’s not afraid to throw himself in the middle of the situation to serve the cause of justice. That’s his personality. Is that a good trait or a bad trait? Unfortunately, the answer is not as simple to sort out as that question would lead you to believe. Certainly it’s good for him to react against injustice in the world. God despises injustice. We should be affected by it and sickened by it when we see it in the world. That’s a godly response. Likewise, we should do whatever we can and whatever is proper to help bring it to an end. We should pursue justice in the world. However, the goal of justice does not legitimize every step you take to that end. What we see in these three scenes is instructive for our time. The way Moses engages each situation is different. The outcome of each situation is also different. Take a step back and consider each scene.

Scene One, which involves the Egyptian acting violently toward the Hebrew, puts Moses face to face with injustice. A person in power (the Egyptian, the non-slave) is abusing the person without power (the Hebrew, the slave). That’s wrong. It’s always wrong for people to abuse their power. And while the text doesn’t say that the violence was racially motivated, the setting of the day clearly involved racial tensions that would naturally give way to this kind of abuse. The Hebrews were viewed with suspicion. That’s why they were enslaved by the Pharaoh in the first place. Moses is right to be angered by what he sees and while the proper response would have involved him springing into some action, murder, we all would agree, is excessive. He has seen evil committed against one of his people and he responds in kind. He returns evil for evil. This is vengeance. This is wrong.

Scene Two, the Hebrew beating another Hebrew, also involves injustice. Someone is clearly in the wrong. Once again, Moses seeks to intervene, this time with his words. This is a better strategy. But what happens? They don’t take him seriously. Why? Because his actions in the previous scene made him lose the moral high ground. He may be right, but they can’t see that. They are distracted by the sinful ways Moses previously sought justice. They can’t hear his logic, they can’t see the truth, all they see is Scene One and Scene One leads them to tune out Moses when he calls for justice.

Then we have Scene Three, the daughters being harassed by the shepherds. We are not told precisely how Moses intervenes, but it doesn’t seem excessive. It’s effective. He delivers the women. And his help is also coupled with service, seen in selfless act of him watering the flocks belonging to these women. I think we

all can agree that Scene Three was not only the most effective example of Moses pursuing justice, but also the best example we've seen so far. How we pursue justice matters.

Now then, I cannot help but notice a number of parallels between this text and the situation we find ourselves in as a nation. It's not directly parallel, of course, but it is analogous. There is a lot of outcry today concerning injustice and injustice that is racially motivated. The vast majority of the public outcry centers on alleged injustices that law enforcement have perpetuated against minorities, particularly black citizens. Both sides will debate the statistics all you want (and it seems that's all most of the talking heads on the TV want to do), but that doesn't change that fact that at some of that outcry is absolutely justified. There is injustice in our world. There are people in power, in every profession (including law enforcement), who abuse their power. Racism is real. Sometimes the abuse of power and racism go hand and hand. It happens.

Just because you would never consider yourself racist or have never experienced or witnessed racism, doesn't mean it doesn't exist. Your experience does not prove everyone else's reality. Your experience doesn't disprove someone else reality. Just because the vast majority of police officers carry themselves with the utmost dignity and honorable service and sacrifice, doesn't mean there are not crooked and racist cops on the streets and it doesn't mean that those cops who disgrace the badge don't benefit from certain systems that are in place that you may be ignorant of.

Injustices do occur. Even if it is exaggerated at times, the injustice is not imagined. And we aren't going to get anywhere unless we stop yelling, we stop judging entire groups of people by whatever category stereotypes we give them (be it race or vocation), and we start listening. We start humbling ourselves. We start empathizing. We do what the Bible says and we weep with those who weep (Romans 12:15). Don't quote statistics to them. Weep with them! We have to become quick to listen and slow to speak and slow to anger (James 1:19). And I actually think Exodus 1 and 2 can help us do that. Just how it helps us to do that we will consider next week.

Today, I want us to linger on the point I already mentioned—How we pursue justice matters. If you look at injustices in our society and respond in violence, you are wrong. You're part of the problem. There are obvious examples of this. The most obvious is the evil actions of one depraved individual who murdered and seriously injured police officers in the city of Dallas as they were serving the people of Dallas by protecting their right to peacefully assemble for protest. It doesn't matter what the motivations were of the man who committed those assassinations, it doesn't matter if they were a response to real injustices in our society, his actions were categorically wrong. They were evil. He was not a martyr. He was an evil man with a sinful heart. Even if in his twisted mind he thought he was pursuing justice, he was not. He was committing injustice. How we pursue justice matters.

But that truth applies in other situations too. For example, I'm all about peaceful protest. I have no issue with civil disobedience. Sometimes, as Christians, that's the only course of action we have available to us, if we are going to be faithful to our Lord. I don't have an issue with people marching to call attention to injustice or problems with our legal system. I don't have an issue with any of those things. They could be an appropriate approach to seeking justice. That could be a legitimate way to effect positive change in our world. Martin Luther King Jr. is a clear example of this. To me, he is one of the most inspiring and courageous men in American history and one of the most influential Baptist pastors to have ever lived. He did those things. But he did them peacefully. He wasn't spitting on cops. He wasn't screaming racial slurs at white police officers. He wasn't dehumanizing individuals simply because they chose for their vocation law enforcement. He didn't call for the vandalizing property. And I think these are some of the reasons his voice was heard by some who may not have agreed with him at first and why his efforts were so effective in the long run for the civil rights movement.

But there are some—and it's hard to know how many truly because the media will magnify or disguise the reality based on the narrative they are trying to tell—who engage in some of these same methods of Dr.

King but in less than peaceful ways. And that doesn't serve the cause of justice. Please notice that when Moses responded to the evil that he encountered with evil, it destroyed his credibility. When he tried to speak truth into and bring justice out of a situation later (Scene Two) the people wouldn't listen because they were too distracted by the evil that Moses himself committed previously when he was "pursuing justice" in misguided ways (Scene One). How you pursue justice matters.

Furthermore, since Moses went about it the wrong way, a sinful way, a way that returned evil-for-evil, he actually set back the deliverance of his people another 40 years! That's how long he would be in Midian. That's how long it took for God to send him back to Egypt to deliver the Hebrew people and actually bring about the justice Moses sought here in Exodus 2. Now obviously there is a divine plan that is unfolding, but somewhere in that divine plan this setback in Moses' life occurred because of his zealous missteps. He had good intentions. But he actually did more harm than good in his first attempts. And I'm afraid we see something similar in this world today. There are people who will not accept that there is actual racism in our world today and actual injustices that do occur against certain people simply because of their color of their skin, they will not accept these realities, they won't listen, they won't try to empathize because they are too distracted by some of the violent ways that justice is being sought by some (even if it's only a very small "some" and much smaller percentage of people than the TV would have us to believe). Friends, this is why how we pursue justice matters.

But here is another reason it matters. How we pursue justice matters because, if we are not careful, we can become what we hate. Racism is wrong. Always. Period. There is no place for it in the church. No place for it in the people of God. It is wrong to make those sorts of categorical judgments about a whole group of people (e.g., Hebrews, Black males). And if there are injustices that occur because someone has hostility towards a group of people, then we should seek an end to that injustice. But if in the process of seeking justice, we look at the guilty parties (e.g., some crooked and racist cops) and we hold it against an entire group of people (e.g., all cops), then are we not guilty of the same sin? Have we not become the thing we were so upset about? Have we not likewise generalized about an entire group of people and looked at that group with derision or suspicion? Of course. So we have to be careful. We don't want to commit the very sins we are trying to bring to an end. Moses thought the Hebrew people would appreciate his stand on their behalf. But the Hebrew people didn't want to replace one murdering leader for another murdering leader. Make sense? In responding against evil, he became guilty of the same evil. He just swapped out the victim. How we pursue justice matters.

It matters on a spiritual plain too. True and complete justice will never come until Jesus returns. When He comes full justice will be established. That may sound like good news—and it is good news for His people—but it's only good news if you have a substitute who bore your sin and its condemnation. And that is what we can have in Jesus Christ. The reason Jesus came is because there was a death warrant out for sinners. People like us. People who have lived life in rebellion against God and have done many things He does not approve of. People who have anger and bitterness in their hearts. People who have not loved their neighbor. People who have ignored God's will for their lives. Any of those sins (and any other) makes us deserving of the judgment of God. But when Jesus came, He took upon Himself that sin in the place of sinners like us. He experienced God's judgment towards that sin, so that we wouldn't have to experience it one day. He died for our sins. And He rose from the dead and offers us His perfect record so that we can have a peaceful and loving relationship with God. We receive that through faith in Jesus. That's the only way. When we come to Jesus and trust in Him alone to save us we will be saved. And in that way, justice is served. But it was served by our Substitute, Jesus Christ. He is a wonderful Savior. He's given His all for us. We should give our all for Him. We should put all our trust in Him. And if we do that, when He returns one day bringing complete and total justice, that justice will be for us and not against us.

Amen! Hallelujah! What a Savior!

¹ Bruckner points out that the same language is used in Isaiah 59, but with God as the subject. “*The LORD saw it, and it displeased him that there was no justice. He saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no one to intercede; then his own arm brought him salvation, and his righteousness upheld him*” (Isaiah 59:15-16). This parallel may support the interpretation. James K. Bruckner, *Exodus* (UBCS; Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008), 32.