

Sermon: **JUSTICE IS: GRACE**

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We were playing cards in our family once and one of the boys walked in and said, "Oh! Deal me in!" So he sat down and we dealt out another hand and we started playing and two or three hands in he said, "Wait, are we playing Hearts or Rummy?"

I had a high school friend who did a brief exchange trip to New Zealand and was pleased when some of his school buddies asked to join them for a game of football after school but was surprised when he got there and they were playing soccer. Because that's what we call soccer everybody else in the world calls football.

If you don't know which game you're playing and what the rules are, it's not going to go well. We human beings are pretty sure that we have figured out the rules of life. Every society figures out the rules and builds a society around those rules. We build religions about those rules and every religion in every society has a different set of those rules. Well we're pretty sure that we've got those rules figured out. Oddly enough, the rules we think the world runs by are pretty much like the rules of football.

The object is to score points with God. There are various different ways to score, and you get different points depending on how you score. There are also some fouls and various penalties for those fouls. We're pretty sure that those are the rules. There are some good things that you should do and if you do them, you'll be rewarded, and there are some bad things that you shouldn't do and if you do them, you will be punished, you'll be penalized. And the object is to score points with God.

We believe those are the rules life follows— even though we keep noticing that *life doesn't follow those rules*. But instead of questioning the rules we think life should be following, we stand up and yell at the ref because they're making bad calls! "That was a perfectly good play, he caught that pass in bounds and you ruled it out of bounds. How can that possibly be? There must be some mistake. Why do bad things happen to good people?"

When we ask that question that's what we're getting at. Isn't there a rule that good things are supposed happen to good people? And what about those bad people who get away with it? "Why do the wicked prosper?" as Psalm 37 says. Isn't there a rule when you do bad things, bad stuff is supposed to happen to you? How come it doesn't happen?

We really do believe in those rules. We joke about it sometimes. We joke about getting struck by lightning when we've done something bad. When you find a parking place right in front of the door you say, "Oh I must have done something good this morning." Because deep down we actually do think that if you do something good, good stuff should happen to you and if you do something bad, bad stuff should happen to you. Those are the rules. What you're trying to do is score points with God.

And along comes Jesus and says, "Nope, those are not the rules." In fact here's the scary part, there's only one rule.

Scary isn't it? Because you think, "Oh come on there ought to be at least ten, right? Don't we have ten, if not six hundred and eleven? Come on, there's got to be a lot of rules. Like football." But Jesus says, "Just one. This is it: God loves you and wants you to love." That's it. God loves you and everybody else and God wants you to love God and everybody else. That's the only rule.

Part of us says, "No that can't be right." You're supposed to do good stuff, and if you follow that, if you're loving, you get some kind of reward right? Like maybe God gives you wealth?" And Jesus says, "Nope. People are wealthy in all kinds of ways, and many of them are bad— but the rule is: even if you're poor, God loves you. Blessed are the poor."

"Well, OK," we say, "so maybe God doesn't necessarily give you money but God gives you *some* kind of sort of reward for your spiritual goodness, right? And Jesus says, "Nope. The rule is that God loves you, even if you are spiritually poor. Blessed are those who are poor in spirit for theirs is the entire realm of God."

"Well," we say, "But seriously, if you do good stuff then God must at least make you *happy*, right?" And Jesus says, "No. People are happy, or un happy, for all sorts of reasons. But the rule is even if you're unhappy God loves you. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."

"Well," we say, "But still, if you do good things doesn't God give you some kind of status? And Jesus says, "No, people get power and status in all kinds of ways, not always good. Blessed are you when you don't have any power or status. Blessed are the meek for they inherit the earth."

"Well, but God must at least help you be comfortable if you follow all the rules, right?" And again Jesus says "No. In fact if you follow God's love it might make you uncomfortable. But blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness." Still we insist: "God must reward you in some way if you at least love God, right?" And Jesus says, "No." Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for God, who don't have God, who don't even love God yet. The only rule is that God loves you and wants you to love."

“Well, then,” we protest, “if that’s true, if you don’t get anything out of it, then why do it? What’s the point?” And Jesus says, “The point is not to get anything out of it. The object is that you love. That’s the point.” What you get out of loving is that you’re loving. Love is itself the point. That’s why you do it. Blessed are those who are merciful because they know they receive mercy. Blessed are those who are pure in heart, whose heart is purely love for God and for everybody else. Blessed are those who are peacemakers, who show love even amidst conflict.

“Well,” we say, “that makes it a really hard game. God must have some way of making it easier for us, right? If you do all that stuff at least God sort of clears the way for you, right?” And Jesus says, “Well, no. If you really love God and love your neighbors, if you are really merciful and pure in heart and a peacemaker, people will make it hard for you. But the one rule is: blessed are you. God loves you. When you are persecuted, blessed are you. Rejoice! Great is your reward in heaven. And remember heaven is not the afterlife. It’s not real estate for dead people. Heaven is the heart of God. Your reward is that God loves you.

We don’t like that there’s only one rule. We’re pretty sure that that can’t be true. So Jesus coaches us and encourages us to practice forgetting those other rules. Just ignore them. Just don’t go there. He’s always breaking all of those other rules in order to follow that one rule.

When they asked Jesus, “What’s the greatest commandment?” He says, “Love God and love your neighbor.” That’s the only rule. Everything else is a footnote to that one rule. When he’s leaving his disciples the night in which he’s arrested, he says, “Ok listen up team. You need to know this. I’m giving you one rule. Not ten, not six hundred and eleven. One. I have loved you, now you love one another. God loves you and wants you to love. That’s the rule.”

Now Jesus didn’t just make that up. Although there are those six hundred and eleven rules in the Old Testament, all those commandments and all those sacrifices and all those procedures and lots of stuff about rewards and punishments, all those points and penalties—there is also a voice running through the entire Old Testament that says, “Those are just the footnotes.” The rule is this: The Lord is merciful and gracious, Slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, who does not punish us according to our sins but forgives us (Nehemiah 9.17; Psalm 86.5, 15; Psalm 14.8-9; Joel 2.13; Jonah 4.2..).

So Micah says, “With all these rules, what do we need to do for God? Is God pleased when we offer all these sacrifices follow all these rules, get all the offerings right? Nope. What does God require of us but this one thing? To do justice, to love mercy, to walk humbly with God.”

When we use the word justice it’s hard for us folks who believe in all those rules not to think of justice in terms of points and penalties. But what justice means for God is that God loves you and wants you to love everybody. And a society in which everybody gets loved is justice. It has

nothing to do with deserving, has nothing to do with points or penalties, with what you've done good or bad. It's that everybody gets what they need in order to receive God's love and share God's love.

This epiphany season we're going to hear about justice over and over and over again. Every week we're going to hear more about what justice is and how it works and how it looks. The foundation of it all is this simple truth – that justice is grace. It's not something that can be imposed.

Certainly there are rules and laws and procedures and policies that will enact justice but what justice is, is grace - the love of God for everybody. It's hard for us to let go of all those little rules of deserving, all that belief that if you've done good then you should get a reward and if you've done bad then you should get punished. It's hard for us to let go of all of that football. But the wonderful thing is that when we can really live our lives by that one rule and allow God to love us and to love everybody, and then to love God and to love everybody, when we live by that one rule, we appreciate the whole thing so much more. Then, although it's not about winning or losing, we experience what scripture dares to call victory.