

March 17/18, 2012

Restoring the Social Fabric

Let Justice Flow

Proverbs 3:1-2, 13-20, 27-28; 11:10; 29:7

Pastor Bryan Clark

We've been talking about what it means to *do justice*. We want to continue that conversation this morning, but we want to look at this through the lens of what the Old Testament refers to as *Shalom*. In order to just stir our thinking a little bit, I want to start by thinking about an industry that pretty much all of us have to have contact with—that tends to have a reputation that perhaps isn't always real positive—and that would be the auto industry. The auto industry is a tough industry and I think, overtime, there are those who have gained a reputation for kind of being those who advantage themselves by disadvantaging others. I would say, at the end of the day, there's always been those in the industry that have treated people unfairly. There's also, I think, always been those in the industry who have sought to operate with the highest degree of integrity. So, like all industries, there's the good and the bad. If you think about the auto industry, you tend to think about money and profit and working a deal and you wonder if the repairs are always what's necessary and we kind of get in that frame of mind.

But what if we completely changed our thinking and thought about it like this? Can you imagine very many industries in our community that are as basic and fundamental to what you need to make it in our community? Another way it's basic is if you're going to have a job, if you're going to go to school, if you're going to have a family and take your kids to school and the doctor and to soccer and go to church and serve in a ministry and, when you start to think about it all, Lincoln isn't exactly a community with a lot of mass transit. If you don't have a car it would be very difficult to really make it. So if we start thinking about the auto industry in those terms, what if a salesman, instead of thinking that this is really an opportunity to wheel and deal and make the best deal possible in order to make more money, what if that salesman was in the frame of mind that I was to give someone the opportunity to have safe, reliable transportation at a reasonable cost? I am actually giving this person a chance, this person a chance to grow, this person a chance to advance, this person a chance to pursue his or her hopes and dreams. By just doing this fairly, I'm actually giving somebody a chance to make it.

And what if the mechanic began to think that instead of just turning a wrench to somehow make a profit, that what I'm doing is, by doing my job well and giving somebody safe, reliable transportation, what I'm actually doing is giving someone a chance? I'm contributing to the possibility that they could pursue their dreams and have a chance to advance and to grow and to experience life and joy in our community. It would be a completely different way of looking at an industry that we all interact with. Now I don't think this is new. I think there are those in the auto industry that get this and they are seeking to do exactly that. To be in that frame of mind would be what the Old Testament refers to as *shalom*. That's what we want to talk about.

If you have a Bible, turn with me this morning to Proverbs, Chapter 3. The entire Old Testament talks about the concept of *shalom*. We're going to limit our conversation this morning just to the book of Proverbs. If you aren't familiar with Proverbs, it's a collection of short, pithy statements or a collection of proverbs. It's a little hard to outline and to organize, but it's full of lots of wisdom.

Proverbs 3, verse 1:

**My son, do not forget my teaching,
But let your heart keep my commandments;
For length of days and years of life,
And peace they will add to you.** (*NASB Proverbs 3:1-2)

Verse 2 is the introduction of the concept of shalom in the Proverbs. *Shalom* is a Hebrew word that's typically translated *peace*. It's one of those Hebrew words that a lot of people throw around but very few people actually know what it means. When the text says ...**peace**, it's not just talking about the absence of war. It's not just talking about kind of being quiet and peaceful. It's actually a very big comprehensive concept. It's about wholeness; it's about health. It's about a universal flourishing of a community. Alvin Plantinga, in his wonderful book entitled *Not the Way It's Supposed To Be*, has an entire chapter on what he calls "The Vandalism of Shalom". He reminds us that God's vision in original creation was for shalom, but sin has done vandalism to shalom. Sin destroys shalom.

One of the metaphors he uses, which is a biblical metaphor for shalom, is the idea of a piece of fabric. It's the idea of thousands of threads that are woven together with other threads, that creates hundreds of thousands of intersecting points, that ultimately come together to make a fabric. It's the fabric of shalom that holds us up. It's the idea of an individual, a family, a neighborhood, the government, the marketplace, schools, social agencies, all intersecting one another, all working together in order to create an environment where everybody can flourish. If you think of an orchestra playing a magnificent piece of music, we would refer to that as musical shalom—harmony—all the different instruments, all the different notes coming together to make something beautiful. That's the concept of shalom. For shalom to work, people must be willing to disadvantage themselves in order to advantage the greater community—everybody working together that we all might flourish.

Sin then is the enemy of shalom; it does violence to shalom; it does vandalism to shalom. It unravels the fabric because sin, at its very essence, is selfish and, when I'm willing to disadvantage others in order to advantage myself, I start to unravel the fabric of shalom. Literally what you're doing, when you do that, is you are sawing off the very branch you are sitting on. Because, when the fabric of shalom comes unraveled, everybody pays the price. Plantinga summarizes his chapter by saying, "Because God is *for* shalom, God is *against* sin." God's vision for the world He created was for shalom. God's vision for redemption is the restoration of shalom. That's what it means to do justice. We pick it up then in verse 13:

**How blessed is the man who finds wisdom,
And the man who gains understanding.**

The Proverbs talk a lot about wisdom. I think the best way to think about **wisdom** is *skillful living*. Oftentimes then wisdom is personified, in this case in the female voice, as if wisdom is a person.

**For her profit is better than the profit of silver,
And her gain better than fine gold.
She is more precious than jewels;
And nothing you desire compares with her.
Long life is in her right hand;
In her left hand are riches and honor.
Her ways are pleasant ways,
And all her paths are shalom. (Vs. 14-17)**

In verse 1 we were told that by listening to God's teachings and keeping His commandments is how we weave together shalom. Now farther in the chapter, how we live skillfully is by following God's commandments, which are more valuable than gold and silver but do produce riches. The riches then are used in order to create shalom. That's what the text is saying. Then he goes on and uses creation as a model of shalom. Verse 19:

**The LORD by wisdom founded the earth;
By understanding He established the heavens.
By His knowledge the deeps were broken up,
And the skies drip with dew. (Vs. 19-20)**

God's vision for shalom can be seen in the world in which He has created, even though sin has affected perfect creation. Romans 8 says, "All creation groans and awaits redemption." There is still a sense of shalom within the world that God has made. The universe is remarkable in terms of its ability to function together in a finely-tuned universe that gives us the world in which we live.

Over the years, as we've advanced in technology, all we really learn is that regardless of how much we know, we still don't know very much. I'm always intrigued by the scientist who discovers another great wonder and, in discovering that, seems to think of himself or herself in some form, as God. And I would say, "Now wait a minute here. God wouldn't be the One who discovers the wonder; God would be the One who created the wonder. And when you look at the universe, it is magnificent in terms of its ability to work together. To think somehow this finely-tuned universe is merely a product of chance is quite a remarkable leap of faith. What the writer of Proverbs is saying is the universe is a marvel of shalom, which is a reminder of what we're about in social shalom. Move on then to verse 27:

**Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due,
When it is in your power to do it.
Do not say to your neighbor "Go, and come back,
And tomorrow I will give it,"
When you have it with you.**

The proverb is saying that we are responsible to do what we can do. It's more the idea of breaking life into days and moments. I may not, at this moment, be able to help starving children somewhere else in the world but, if in this moment there is something I *can* do, that has to do with restoring shalom, has to do with doing justice, would just simply be the right thing, then I should do that. I'm responsible for that; I'm accountable for that.

The word *good* ...**do not withhold good**...is an interesting Hebrew word. When we think of goodness we tend to think of morality and right and wrong—and that's correct. But this Hebrew word for good goes beyond that to the idea of action. It flows out of the Hebrew model of education. We in the West embrace a Greek model of education which is basically: if you can regurgitate information on a test, then you know it. But the Hebrew model was very different from that. The Hebrew model was: if you don't live it, you don't know it. They literally did not have a category for head knowledge. It was as simple as: if you're not doing it, you don't know it. So what this word implies is: if you don't act, you're *not* good. Good means you *do* something. James has almost the exact same argument in the New Testament. James, chapter 2, says, "Okay, if you're a person of faith and someone knocks on your door and they are in need of food or they are in need of warmth and you say to them, 'Go, be warm and be filled,' and you turn them away, he asks the question, 'what good has that done?' what good has that done if you haven't actually haven't done what was necessary to meet that need?" It's the exact same idea here that, if we have within our potential—our capacity—the ability to do something, to do justice, then it's our responsibility to do it. Now that's pretty straight forward; I doubt anyone is going to argue with that.

Where the proverb gets quite interesting is the last part of verse 27 when it says, **Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due.** Now what does that mean? Literally what the Hebrew means is: those for whom it is deserved, those who have the right. In other words, is the proverb saying that those people have the right to expect some of my stuff? The answer is, "Yes, that is what it is saying." Now it's built on several levels of theology. First of all it's not promoting the idea of an attitude of

entitlement. It's not talking about those that are lazy, those that won't work, those that won't take care of themselves, those that are advantaging the system. Those would be included among the wicked. Those are people that are advantaging themselves by disadvantaging everybody else. It's not talking about that and the Proverbs would be very clear about that. But what it is talking about is the reminder that, at the end of the day, it's really not your stuff. If your response is, "Why should they have access to my stuff?" I think the first thing God would say is, "Because it's not your stuff!" The Bible is very clear from beginning to end, it is God's stuff and you're merely a steward of it. And God says, "They have a right to My stuff."

So that's the starting point. It's also understanding that when shalom unravels, when sin does vandalism to shalom, it never shakes out fairly. There are those who receive far more than others and the vision of shalom is: we all take what we have and use it to try to bring about shalom within a group, within a community.

So think of it like this: There's a tendency for us to think that I have what I have because I've worked really hard. I have what I have because I've gone to college and I've been disciplined and I have really worked and I've really accumulated and that's why I have what I have. We talked about this in the Amos series and I would say, "Good for you". That accounts for about 2% of how you got where you are. You say, "Well, what do you mean?" I mean about 98% of everything is totally out of your control. To think somehow *you've* done this is absolutely ludicrous. You've had no control over whether you were born in the 20th century or the 10th century. You had no control over whether you were born in the United States or you were born in the streets of India. You had no control over whether you were born to a loving family or an abusive family. You had no control over whether your mom was a drug addict or a wonderful, loving mother. You've had no control over your talents, gifts and abilities that are gifts from God. You've had no control over whether you were born crippled or healthy. You've had no control over whether you were in a car accident and crippled for life or you are still healthy. You have no control over whether or not were hit by a drunk driver. You have no control over whether you have cancer. You have no control over whether you are blind or you can see. You have no control over these things and, actually, the very fact that you have breath in your lungs today is a gift of God. When you see it that way, what you actually control is maybe 1 or 2%, so good for you for maximizing that, but don't start thinking *you've* done it all.

When shalom shakes out, it just doesn't land fairly. So think of it like this: Last week Mark talked to you about a couple of initiatives that we're putting forth where people can get involved in a very simple way to make a significant difference in our city. One of those was getting involved through *City Impact* to be a volunteer to help students learn to read. It can virtually change the life of one of these students. Or connect as a mentor to one of these children through *City Impact*. He also talked about the possibility of investigating foster care that we, as churches in the state of Nebraska, could come together and actually resolve this, so every child would have a loving, Christian home to belong to. Now in each of those cases, we could argue for the rest of the day. What are the causes? Who shall we blame that these children are in these situations? Is it the breakdown of the family? Is it a moral breakdown? Is it a community breakdown? Is it a breakdown in the social structures? We could argue that till the sun goes down but I'm going to guess there's not a single person in this room this morning that would say, "It's the child's fault". It's not the child's fault—the child didn't ask for that. And so when shalom comes down, it doesn't come down fairly—and some of these children suffer the consequences of that.

Others of us have been quite blessed. The idea of the proverb is saying, "*Then it's the responsibility of the blessed to catch a vision for what God intended in shalom.*" And it's the right of those who have difficult circumstances to expect that the people of God would come alongside, share their resources, and at least give them a fighting chance. We talked about this in the Amos series. This isn't just about compassion; this isn't just about generosity. This is about *right* and *wrong*. They have the *right* to expect that from us because it's God's stuff and it needs to be redistributed after the fabric of shalom has

been torn apart. That's what the proverb is talking about. Right in that same line of thinking, turn to Chapter 11. In verse 10 it says:

**When it goes well with the righteous, the city rejoices,
And when the wicked perish, there is joyful shouting.**

Now the Hebrew phrase **...goes well...** basically means when somebody prospers, when somebody has abundance, when somebody is wildly successful, when somebody becomes wealthy. You remember we learned at the end of the book of Amos that God has no problem with prosperity; He has no problem with abundance. He has no problem with blessing His people. The issue is: what do we do with the abundance that God has given us? That's the core of the issue—whether we're going to be selfish and greedy or whether we're going to catch a vision to restore shalom. So why does it say, **When it goes well?** When somebody in the marketplace prospers wildly, why would **the city rejoice?**

That Hebrew word translated **the city rejoices** is almost exclusively used for a city that is celebrating a military victory. The idea is this: When the army goes out to battle, the entire city is at risk. If the army loses, it isn't just the army that loses—the city loses. The enemy is going to come; they're going to pillage; they are going to rape. Life, as those people know it, has come to an end. Everybody loses. On the other hand, when the army wins, everybody wins. That's the background of this term. So, again, why is the text saying that when somebody wildly prospers in the marketplace **the whole city rejoices?** The key to understanding that is to notice the one who is succeeding is the *tzadeqah*, is the *righteous*, is the one who is willing to disadvantage himself in order to advantage others. The one who has captured a vision for shalom—the one who understands it's my job to take what God has given me and redistribute it—in order to weave back the fabric of shalom in our community—that we all might prosper together.

Some of you are wired up for the marketplace. You get out there and, man, you get in the zone and you just feel like, "This is what I'm made for; this is what I'm wired up for!" But sometimes it's confusing. I still don't understand how this fits in God's economy. I may well understand the value system of the world if it's just about making money, if it's just about prosperity, if it's just about abundance, if it's more house, more stuff, more cars, more...more...so that I can impress everybody around me, so they will think I'm somebody. That's the value system of the world. But if we don't embrace that, if we say that's not what we're about, sometimes it's confusing why has God wired me to experience success in the marketplace? The answer I think is in the proverb—that when you succeed, when you are prosperous, when you get in the zone and God blesses that, you have a chance to capture God's vision for shalom and to turn around and to share that with others in order that the city might rejoice and say it's awesome that you succeeded because we all benefitted from that. Now I need to be really clear what we mean by that, because over the years I've had many business people say to me something like this: "You know, Pastor Clark, we're working this deal and it's a really big deal and has the potential of bringing in \$5,000,000 so I want you to pray with me about it, because if God brings in \$5,000,000, I promise I will tithe 10% to God's kingdom." I'll guarantee you, that's a prayer God will not answer. That's a great deal for you—kind of a lousy deal for God—and a lousy deal for shalom. How about this: how about you keep 20% and God gets 80% to restore shalom? Every person in this room could easily live on \$500,000 a year.

To understand what we're saying is not just giving back a little percentage of it; it's capturing a vision for shalom. Over the years I have had countless business people say to me, "I really want to grow a kingdom-minded business and, out of the profits, I want to support God's kingdom," which is a wonderful thing but very few, over the years, have ever done that. Something happens along the way. We just spend more; we just consume more; we just buy more stuff. We don't get to the point where we really realize God's vision for shalom and something changes and God blesses us wildly and we pour those resources back into capturing God's vision for shalom. The proverb also says that *when the*

wicked are destroyed, the city rejoices. The city says, “You know that person was advantaging himself or herself by disadvantaging the community, so when they go out of business, everybody cheers because, when they do business that way, everybody loses.

So think of it this way: What if we collectively, as a body of believers, prayed for those people in the marketplace that are wired up in such a way that God could bless them with significant prosperity as long as that person is *tzadeqah* and as long as that person gets God’s vision for shalom. It would be a righteous prayer to say, “God, we’re praying that You would cause those businesses to prosper beyond their wildest imagination, so the city could rejoice and we could bring shalom to our city.” I would say that’s a very right prayer. I would equally say it’s a right prayer that, “God, we pray that You would shut down every business that is destroying shalom, every business that advantages itself by disadvantaging the community. Shut them down and we will cheer.” That would be a correct application of that proverb. We pray for the righteous and we pray for the shutdown or the demise of the wicked.

Very interesting in Jeremiah, Chapter 29, if you want to read just a little bit more about this: When the Assyrians came and captured the Hebrew people in 722 BC, hauled them into captivity, then the Babylonians conquered the Assyrians. Jeremiah writes while the Hebrew people were under the Babylonians and, in chapter 29 he says to the Hebrews, “Make this city flourish”. I guarantee you that was a pagan city to the core. But what God was saying is, “Marry; have children; do business; do everything in your power to cause this city to flourish in the name of God—that the people of this city would realize that their city is better because the people of God live there.”

Tim Keller, the pastor of a Presbyterian church in New York City, who has done a significant amount of good in the inner city of New York, said that early on in his ministry he went to a conference and there was this speaker, a missionary from the inner city, who said something he’s never forgotten, that, “If you really understand God’s vision for shalom, you understand that you’re not there to see how you can use the resources of the city to create a great church, but you’re there to use the resources of the church in order to create a great city.” It’s exactly what Jeremiah 29 says.

The last proverb I want to look at is in chapter 29, verse 7. It says:

**The righteous (the *tzadeqah*) is concerned for the rights of the poor,
The wicked does not understand *such* concern. (*NASB Proverbs 29:7)**

What’s interesting about this proverb is the word translated, **concerned**. It is the Hebrew word *yada* which is the word that typically is used to describe the sexual relations between a husband and a wife, to describe the intimate relationship that God wants to have with His people. It’s a word filled with passion. Literally what the text is saying is the *tzadeqah* is as passionate about shalom as a husband is passionate about his wife. On the other hand, **the wicked** don’t even get it. The wicked don’t even understand; they don’t care. It’s hard to imagine, but perhaps there are some of you that have been here through the Amos series and, in your mind you’re thinking, “That’s enough of this stuff; I don’t get it; I don’t care about it; nobody oppresses the poor. Let’s get over it and move on.” I don’t know how you can possibly have God within you and think that way. How can you be so far off from the very heartbeat of God? What the text is saying is: the wicked—they don’t get it; they don’t understand; they don’t care about it; they don’t even want to talk about it. But the *tzadeqah* who is in tune with the heart of God is as passionate about this as a husband is passionate about his wife.

Okay, this is week number nine. Enough talk—it’s time to *do*. So that’s the question: What are we going to do to *Let Justice Flow*? Last week Mark talked to you about some possibilities. I mentioned those earlier. Again, the possibility of being a part of *City Impact’s* reading program in the inner city, of being part of mentoring one of these children, or pursuing something, at least investigating the options

in foster care. Those are ways you can make a significant difference. There are many organizations in the hallways again this weekend—wonderful organizations that you can talk to, that you can interact with, in order to understand how you might connect in a significant way to make a difference, to restore shalom in our community. Remember, these people are going to a lot of work to set up in the hall in order to make it convenient for you, so please take the time to talk to them. Maybe God calls you to be involved in youth ministry or children’s ministry and do justice there. There’s a lot of need there. I don’t know what God might be calling you to. I just know God is calling you to something.

So here’s what we’re going to do. I’m going to invite Mike and the team to come back on stage. In just a minute they are going to sing a song. While they are singing the song, I would invite each of us to prayerfully consider: what is God nudging us toward? What is God calling us to? When you walked in the door, you should have received a piece of fabric and a pen. If you don’t have one, raise your hand and one of the ushers will get you one. What we would like you to do is this: During the song, when the song is over, the band will continue to play. We have plenty of time. You can sit there quietly, but when you have some sense that this is what God’s calling you to, we’re inviting you to write that on the piece of fabric. You can put one word; you can put a sentence. If you are an over-achiever you can put a paragraph. You can put your name on it; you don’t have to. It’s really between you and God. You’re saying, “I think this is what God is calling me to do to help restore the fabric of shalom.” As soon as you have that, then we invite you to get up and you can either come down front, drop it on the stairs or, if you just want to drop it in the aisle, that’s fine; we’ll pick it up. But once you have that and drop it off, then you’re free to go. Is that clear? This is our statement of what we’re willing to do to restore the fabric of shalom. We will collect all of these and, by next week, all of them will be stitched into one fabric as our testimony of our commitment to restore the fabric of shalom in Lincoln.

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Opening Discussion

1. Think about Bryan's illustration of the auto dealer as it relates to "doing justice" in a community. What things are you involved in that could be recaptured as a way of "doing justice?"
2. What are some differences you see in our community between the way things are and the way things ought to be?

Bible Study

1. What is the Hebrew concept of "shalom"? In what way is it like a fabric? What was God's original vision as it relates to shalom and what is His vision today?
2. Read Proverbs 3:1-2. What brings about shalom (peace)? If this is true then what unravels shalom? Why is God against sin?
3. Read Proverbs 3:13-20. How does God's creation reflect shalom? What would constitute physical shalom and emotional shalom? What then is social shalom?
4. Read Proverbs 3:27, 28. "Good" in the Hebrew means good action rather than just "being" good. In the Hebrew system to "be" good is to "do" good. What is the text saying? Compare with James 2:14-17.
5. What does the phrase "those to whom it is due" mean in verse 27? What is due them? Why? Does this make "doing good" optional or expected by God?

6. Read Proverbs 11:10. Why does the city rejoice when it goes well with the righteous? Who are the righteous? What is meant by “go well”? Why should we pray that the righteous people in the marketplace are wildly successful? Why should we pray that the selfish, greedy “wicked” go out of business? Read Jeremiah 29:4-9. Remember this was when the Hebrew people were in captivity to a pagan nation. Why would God want that pagan city to flourish?
7. Read Proverbs 14:31 and 22:22, 23. Who does God identify within these texts? If we serve the poor, who are we serving and if we oppress the poor who are we oppressing?
8. Read Proverbs 19:17. Why is “investing” in shalom a good investment?
9. Read Proverbs 29:7. The word translated “concerned” is the Hebrew word for intimacy between a husband and wife. How do the righteous feel about shalom? How does God feel about shalom? What would Jesus do (wwjd)?

Application

1. To know God is to know His heart. What is His heart as it relates to shalom? What does that mean to us as the people of God?
2. What did you write on the piece of fabric? Where is God calling you to make a difference in beginning to restore the fabric of shalom in our city?