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Grace Fellowship Church, Port Jervis, New York

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Fairness and Justice

Isaiah 42:1-7

Prayer: *Father God, we do thank you, we thank you that are our rock, you are our anchor, you are what we can place our trust in and we thank you for that. And Lord, we thank you for this book that you have given to us, we thank you for your word, we thank you that we can place our trust and confidence in that as well. And Lord, this morning as we are opening your book looking into your servant songs in the book of Isaiah, I pray that you would give us the presence of your Holy Spirit, that you would enable us to examine this book and take from it those things that are of lasting value. And I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well, we have been looking at the servant songs in the book of Isaiah, we've been looking at the first servant song which is found in Isaiah 42:1-7. Let me just read that to you. It says: *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. Thus says God, the LORD, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people on it and spirit to those who walk in it: "I am the LORD; I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you; I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness."

Last week, we saw in this servant song the Father's prophetic expression of the life and the ministry of the Son. We learned how the Trinity expressed its delight by the Father: *Behold my servant, whom I uphold*; by the Son: *My chosen, in whom my soul delights*; and by the Holy Spirit: *I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations*. We also learned that the Son would not *cry aloud or lift up his voice or make it heard in the street*, that is he would not become someone who ever tooted his own horn or called attention to himself and his ministry. We also saw the expression of his tenderness, compassion and mercy toward those who were failing, to those whose spirit was about to be quenched. *A bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly*

burning wick he will not quench.

This morning we want to look at the next line in this scripture which says: *He will faithfully bring forth justice.* Justice was God's role for his servant. We see it emphasized even more in the very next line, in verse 4, it says: *He will not grow faint or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his law.* So Jesus, God's servant, will not grow faint, will not be discouraged till he has established justice.

Well, just what does God mean by that term "justice"? How do you define or even describe a term that is used to describe the state of the world as it should be but has not been since the fall of Adam? It's God himself who gives one of the best short descriptions that I know of. He gives it in verse 16 of the very same chapter of Isaiah which says this in *Isaiah 42:16*, he says: *I will bring the blind by a way they did not know; I will lead them in paths they have not known. I will make darkness light before them, and crooked places straight. These things I will do for them, and not forsake them.*

Justice is basically God making crooked places straight, and that includes people and places and attitudes and systems and

governments. They are all in some ways crooked, bent, distorted by the fallenness of mankind. And likewise, our understanding of justice itself is crooked as well. We just don't realize it because we live in a world where crookedness is normal. Let me just give you some examples of our crookedness. There's estimated to be in this world about 30 million human slaves right now in our world. Now, if I'm a slave owner in India and you run away from me, my sense of justice demands your return because you are my property; you belong to me. That's crooked. Now, if I'm an adult of sane mind and perfect health in Switzerland and I'm simply tired of living, I can hire you to kill me and it's perfectly legal. I don't even need to have a doctor. The fact is, 25 percent of all assisted suicides in Switzerland are among people with no physical diseases at all. They are what is described as "simply tired of living." So justice in Switzerland says I can take your life with your permission and no consequence. That's crooked. Or closer to home, if you are a young, unmarried, pregnant female, justice demands that the biological scales be made even by allowing you the same ability to walk away from a pregnancy that a male has. Justice now demands that you be given ultimate control over your body through abortion and that, too, is crooked.

You can see that if the suffering servant of Isaiah's here to bring justice, we need to find out exactly what he means by that term.

Our standard for justice cannot be what this crooked world says it is, but often times we struggle to understand what God's justice is as well. Consider these two scriptures. This first scripture describes God's response to a sin of disobedience. It's in Numbers 15:32. It says this: *Now while the children of Israel were in the wilderness, they found a man gathering sticks on the Sabbath day. And those who found him gathering sticks brought him to Moses and Aaron, and to all the congregation. They put him under guard because it had not been explained what should be done to him. Then the LORD said to Moses, "The man must surely be put to death; all the congregation shall stone him with stones outside the camp." So as the LORD commanded Moses, all the congregation brought him outside the camp and stoned him with stones, and he died. He died for disobedience.* Let me give you another scripture that describes another form of disobedience. This is from Exodus 16:14-20, it says: *And when the layer of dew lifted, there, on the surface of the wilderness, was a small round substance, as fine as frost on the ground. So when the children of Israel saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. And Moses said to them, "This is the bread which the LORD has given you to eat. This is the thing which the Lord has commanded: 'Let every man gather it according to each one's need, one ohmer for each person, according to the number of persons; let every man take for those who are in his tent.'" Then the children of Israel did*

*so and gathered, some more, some less. So when they measured it by
ohmers, he who had gathered much had nothing left over, and he who
gathered little had no lack. Every man had gathered according to
each one's need. And Moses said, "Let no one leave any of it till
morning." Notwithstanding they did not heed Moses. But some of
them left part of it until morning, and it bred worms and stank.
And Moses was angry with them.*

Two different sins of disobedience; two very different responses from Moses and God. One sin of disobedience results in execution by stoning; another sin of disobedience results in spoiled manna. As people say, what's up with that? I mean, it certainly looks by these two examples that God's justice is off because God doesn't appear to be being very fair here. You see, to be fair is to treat each situation with absolute equality. The simplest definition of "fairness" is that everybody gets treated exactly the same, the same proportions, the same rewards, and the same punishments. You know, it's like when you were a child and somebody was to divide a candy bar into two pieces, if one piece was a micron longer or a gram heavier than the other piece, what would you say? Say that's not fair. It's got to be equal. Both pieces have to be precisely the same size for you to say that they are fair. So fairness equals identical sizes, identical treatment, identical responses.

Now, when we look at God's different responses to these two different sins of disobedience, there's something in us that says wait a minute, that's not fair, it's not equal because it's not fair. We look throughout scripture, and we do that and we find many other instances where God just doesn't appear to be fair. You know, Jacob was well known as a liar. He lies his way into claiming Esau's inheritance, but God certainly appears to bless him in spite of that. We get to the New Testament, and Ananias and Sapphira lie and they are instantly struck dead. Is that fair? God says in *Genesis 9:6*: *Whoever sheds man's blood, his blood will be shed by man, for God made man in his image.* God says you take a life, you lose a life. Yet both David and Moses appeared to get away with murder. David commits adultery with Bathsheba then arranges for her husband Uriah to be killed in battle. Moses commits second degree murder by killing an Egyptian and both go on to be mightily used by God. On the other hand we have Pharaoh. Pharaoh's wickedness, instead of being forgiven, is used as an object lesson demonstrating God's glory. As the Israelites begin crossing the Red Sea, God says this in *Exodus 14:4*, he says: *"I will harden Pharaoh's heart so that he will pursue them. Then I will receive glory by means of Pharaoh and all his army, and the Egyptians will know that I am Yahweh."* The Israelites get miraculously freed while the Egyptians get miraculously drowned. And once again you might say well, is that fair? I mean, can we

say based on the evidence that it doesn't appear that God is fair, that he certainly doesn't treat everybody equally. I think we can. But here's the part that I don't think very many people grasp, and if you're ever going to fully grasp what God's justice is all about, you have to grasp this first: God doesn't owe us fair. What he owes each of us is not fairness which is identical treatment to all, but justice which is absolute conformity to his standard of righteousness. You see, there's a reason why David and Moses are spared and Pharaoh is not, and it has nothing to do with their goodness and Pharaoh's badness, because God insists that none of us is good. It has everything to do with God's mercy which he insists he doesn't owe to anyone. *Romans 9:15* says this: *For He tells Moses: I will show mercy to whom I will show mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. So then it does not depend on human will or effort but on God who shows mercy. For the Scripture tells Pharaoh: I raised you up for this reason so that I may display my power in you and that My name may be proclaimed in all the earth. So then, He shows mercy to those He wants to, and He hardens those He wants to harden.* You see, God had plans for Moses and David. He also had plans for Pharaoh. Moses and David would display God's glory by being objects of his mercy but Pharaoh would also display God's glory, in this case by being the object of his judgment. Now we ask is that fair? I mean, did they receive identical treatment? And the answer is

obviously not. The question though is not is that fair, the question is that just.

Isaiah's servant songs says in verse 4: *He will not grow faint or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his law.* You see, God's justice conforms to his standards and not necessarily ours. And God clearly differs from our understanding on this and he insists again in *Isaiah 55: "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, and your ways are not My ways." This is the LORD'S declaration. "For as the heaven is higher than the earth, so My ways are higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts."* You see, we conflate justice and fairness and God never does.

But notwithstanding, someone can look at Pharaoh, someone ask compare Pharaoh and Moses and David and say isn't then a selective form of justice a form of injustice? I mean, a judge who would let some of his loved ones go unpunished for a crime while severely punishing someone he had no regard for, we would call that judge unjust. Isn't God guilty of that? Well, what if the judge, what if he found all parties guilty and then decided to stand in the place of two of those guilty ones and not the third. If the judge himself took on the punishment of the two fully paying their debts, would we still call him unjust if he left the debt of the third

person unpaid? God insists he's got that right. He also recognizes that it is part of our thought process to think that's unfair, and he took great pains to explain himself by way of a story that Jesus told to illustrate this principle. It's in Matthew 20, verses 1-15. Let me just read it to you. Jesus says: *"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the workers on one denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine in the morning, he saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. To those men he said, 'You also go to my vineyard, and I'll give you whatever is right.'* So off they went. About noon and at three, he went out again and did the same thing. Then about five he went and found others standing around, and said to them, *'Why have you been standing around here all day doing nothing?'* *'Because no one hired us,'* they said to him. *'You also go to my vineyard,'* he told them. When evening came, the owner of the vineyard told his foreman, *'Call the workers and give them their pay, starting with the last and ending with the first.'* When those who were hired about five came, they each received one denarius. So when the first ones came, they assumed they would get more, but they also received a denarius each. When they received it, they began to complain to the landowner: *'These last men put in one hour, and you made them equal to us who bore the burden of the day and the*

burning heat!' He replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Didn't you agree with me on a denarius? Take what's yours and go. I want to give this last man the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my business? Are you jealous because I'm generous?'"

We're all familiar with this story. I mean, it is classically taught to represent people coming into the kingdom at various stages in their lives. You know, some come in the morning and those are the children and some come in the afternoon as young people, some come in late afternoon as adults, and it doesn't matter, they all share in the same salvation. But this is also a story that reveals the heart of God on many different levels, and one of those levels is God instructing us on the danger of making false assumptions about fairness and justice. See, in this case it is the workers who make this faulty assumption. Verse 10 says: *They assumed they would get more.* See, the workers made their assumption based on their understanding that justice and fairness were one in the same thing. They assumed that everyone would be treated fairly or in their minds equally. That meant that they assumed that the denarius that Jesus offered to each one was not an absolute figure but basically a baseline to establish a fair wage for each. They assumed that fairness would have demanded that since a one-hour worker gets a denarius, well then an eight-hour

worker would get eight times that, he would get eight denarius. But that's not what the owner had in mind. You see, a denarius was a just wage for someone who had worked the entire day. It was a generous wage for someone who worked only one hour, and the owner claimed he had the right to give either. And when he gives each worker an identical amount, they instantly react to this "unfairness." Verse 11: *"When they received it, they began to complain to the landowner: 'These last men put in one hour, and you made them equal to us who bore the burden of the day and the burning heat!'"* I'd be the first one to tell you, that certainly sounds reasonable to me, sounded reasonable to them, seems to me like they're calling for what is fair. In fact, I'm sure if you put this story before the EEOC or some other government regulation, some other government agency, they'd probably find Jesus in violation of a whole bunch of standards and give him a hefty fine because clearly what he was doing because it was not equal was therefore considered not fair. Because they were not treated identically, they felt they were being treated in a way that was morally wrong and here the owner flat out disagrees. In verse 13 it says: *"He replied to one of them, 'Friend, I'm doing you no wrong.'"*

See, Jesus here is directly challenging their assumptions based on fairness, and he suggests that there is a completely different

frame of reference that he operates from. It is a grace-based frame of reference that states that the owner is required to only give what justice demands. You see, justice demanded a just wage, and a just wage is exactly what was offered to each at the start. The standard of a just day's wage in that day was a denarius. Jesus says, *"Didn't you agree with me for a denarius?"* See, Jesus points out that not only was a denarius a just wage but it was also a wage that each of them had agreed on from the start, and so having satisfied the demands of justice by paying each of them a just wage, Jesus then insists that he is now free to give grace to whomever he chooses. In this case grace means that those who only worked one hour get paid the exact same wage that those who worked for the entire day. Verse 14: *"Take what's yours and go. I want to give this last man the same as I gave you."* But Jesus, we insist, that's not fair. Everyone's not being treated identically. Jesus' response is that his obligation is not to be fair by paying everyone at the same rate but to be just by paying everyone at a minimum a just wage, and having done that, having given a just wage to all, he is then free to give a generous wage to some. Verse 15: *"Don't I have the right to do what I want with my business? Are you jealous because I'm generous?"*

See, you got to understand, Jesus gives us these stories to invite us, as it were, into his mindset, into his way of thinking, and

clearly God's ways are not our ways particularly when it comes to fairness and the difference between justice and mercy. What God says about justice is that the wages of sin is death. And since all of us are sinners, all of us have incurred the very same death sentence. And so justice requires that God gives to each of us what justice demands, but that's the death penalty. *Ezekiel 18:20* says: *The person who sins is the one who will die.*

Now, did God have the right to take the life of someone who was gathering sticks on the Sabbath? Justice says absolutely. God laid out the standard and the punishment, and the stick gatherer decided to challenge that. The Sabbath breaker was not owed mercy, and for God's reasons and purpose, he did not receive it. You see, God owes each of us justice alone. It is the only thing that any one of us can demand from God. What God says about mercy in this parable is that as long as he satisfies the demands of justice, he is therefore free to give generously to whomever he chooses according to grace. A denarius was a just wage for someone who worked an entire day; it was a generous wage for someone who only worked an hour, and the owner claims as long as he has given a just wage to everyone, he's then free to give a generous wage to whomever he chooses. *"Don't I have the right to do what I want with my business? Are you jealous because I'm generous?"*

Now, in this story, the landowner's generosity costs him his wealth. The Son of God's generosity cost him his life. Isaiah's servant song says in *Isaiah 42:4*: *He will not grow faint or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his law. Thus says God, the LORD, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people on it and spirit to those who walk in it: "I am the LORD; I have called you in righteousness; I will take by the hand and keep you; I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness."*

He's calling for justice. Do you know when justice was established in the earth? Do you know when the straight paths made crooked by the sin of Adam were finally made right again? It was Easter morning. That was the time when the Father affirmed his justice by accepting the sacrifice of his Son on behalf of his sheep. And God the Father who through the Son created the heavens, the earth, and the people who walk on it, and the life that is in those people, that God, God the Father, calls God the Son and he says: *"I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you; I will give you as a covenant for the people."* See, the Father says to the Son, *"I will give you as a covenant for the*

people."

You know, each month on the first Sunday of the month we celebrate that covenant with these words of Jesus from *Matthew 26:27*. It says: *Then He took a cup, and after giving thanks, He gave it to them and said, 'Drink from it, all of you. For this is My blood that establishes the covenant; it is shed for many for the forgiveness of sins.'* You see, there's a reason why God can be generous when it comes to forgiving sin and it all goes back to the seeming injustice in his forgiving David and Moses while destroying others like Pharaoh. John Piper points out that God's forgiveness of David's sin left Uriah, the husband of Bathsheba, the one who he had murdered, left Uriah desperate for justice. And when Nathan the prophet confronts David with his sin, he confesses in *2 Samuel 12:13*, he says this: *"I have sinned against the LORD."* Then Nathan replied to David, *"The Lord has taken away your sin; you will not die."* Listen to what Piper says about that. He said, David feels the rebuke of Nathan and in verse 13 he says, "I've sinned against the LORD," to this Nathan responds, "The Lord also has put away your sin. You shall not die." He says just like that! Adultery and murder are "passed over". It's almost incredible, our sense of justice screams out, "No, you just can't do that. You can't let it go like that. He deserves to die or be in prison for life. But Nathan doesn't say that. He says, "The

LORD has put away your sin, you shall not die."

You see, there's a reason why God can put away the sin of David that goes right to the core of the story that Jesus told of the workers in the vineyard. Piper goes on to say this: God saw his glory being despised by sinners like David, he saw his worth belittled and his name dishonored by our sins and rather than vindicating the worth of his glory by slaying his people, he vindicated his glory by slaying his Son. God could have settled accounts by punishing all sinners with hell. This would have demonstrated that he does not minimize our falling short of his glory, our belittling his honor, but God did not will to destroy. "Indeed God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world through him might be saved." See, God knew, God understands justice must be served. David's sin against Uriah was paid for in full, it just wasn't paid for by David. It was paid for by God himself who took on flesh, lived a perfect life and then offered that life in payment for David's sin. God's absolute standard of righteousness demanded it. But it wasn't just David's sin that he died for. It was your sin, and it was my sin as well. It was the sin of every one of his sheep that Jesus went to the cross to pay for. Again God says of his servant in *Isaiah 42:6*: "*I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring*

out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness."

We know when Jesus began his public ministry, he quoted another one of Isaiah's servant song, we see that in *Luke 4:16* which says this: *He came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. As usual, he entered the synagogue on the Sabbath day and stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to Him, and unrolling the scroll, he found the place where it was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is on Me, because he has anointed Me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim freedom to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."* He then rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fixed on him. He began by saying to them, *"Today as you listen, this Scripture has been fulfilled."* Jesus was saying I am the one. He was the suffering servant of Isaiah and his message repeatedly stated that he was sent to free the captives and give sight to those who were blind. His entire life in public ministry was spent giving sight to the blind, and at the end of his life they numbered merely a handful. It was his death that set the captives free and they now number in the billions. Having satisfied justice, he was now free to give mercy. He made this promise in the very same chapter of

Isaiah, again, *"I will bring the blind by a way they did not know; I will lead them in paths they have not known. I will make darkness light before them, and crooked places straight. These things I will do for them, and not forsake them."*

See, there was only one way for Jesus to keep us from being forsaken and that was for him to be forsaken in our place. Jesus himself said in *John 10:11*: *"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."* So the question I want to ask this morning is very simple: Are you one of his sheep? You know, if you are within earshot of my words, the chances are decent that you are among those whom God has chosen to give generous justice to. Jesus said in *John 10:27*: *My sheep hear My voice, I know them, and they follow Me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish -- ever! No one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is great than all. No one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand."*

Now it's a very fair question to ask at this point if you are one of his sheep: Why me? Why me? My daughter Lydia sent me this email just two days ago. It said this, she said: "My friend sent me this text message this morning. I thought it was pretty cool." Her friend said this: "I've been thinking more about God choosing us lately -- it's all over the scriptures. I just feel confused.

Why would he choose me? I'm so glad he did." Isn't that the question? I mean, that's the question that we all ask. Why would God treat you or me any different than he treated Pharaoh? I mean, according to Jesus' parable, as long as Pharaoh and every other son of Adam receives justice, then God's servant Jesus is free to give mercy to whomever he chooses. Pharaoh got justice. Why do we get mercy? Put another way, for what reason would God's commitment to justice for himself and mercy for me cause him to leave paradise, live among us and die so that we might live? Well, God gives us an answer in *1 Peter 2:9*. He says this: *But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for His possession.* You see, this is the answer. You and I are a chosen race that God has raised up for his possession. It's the reason why God's servant song of justice is something that you and I need to take into the very core of our being. As amazing as it is, God chose me. You know, right outside these doors there are hundreds of folks to whom the gospel is nothing more than mere foolishness. For some reason God makes it make sense to us. I mean, that's a privilege it will take all of eternity to unpack.

Again Isaiah 42:6 says He gave His Son: As a covenant for the people, a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. See, God appoints us as priests to a world

that is sitting in darkness. He appoints us as intermediaries between God himself and your family, your friends, and your neighbors. God makes us into a holy nation by cleansing us with his own blood and making us a people for his possession. But God doesn't stop there. The Scripture gives us a why as well. *1 Peter 2:9-10* says this: *But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his possession, so that -- and that's a huge "so that" there -- so that you may proclaim the praises of the One who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. That's why God chose us. That's why we are here. That's why we've received mercy, to proclaim His praises into the darkness he has rescued us from. And you know, it's not really rocket science. It's just living your life for the kingdom. Whether it's preaching a sermon or giving an honest day's work or just taking out the garbage, it's simply life itself lived consciously for the King Himself in a world that is blind to that king. It is now our task to bring justice to that world, to make what is crooked straight. We do that very simply by being what Jesus told us to be in *Matthew 5:14*, he says this: "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they*

may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." Let's pray.

Father, I pray that we would be able to just crack open in a tiny, tiny way the amazing gift that you have given to us, that you have chosen us, that we are your possession. Father, I just thank you for the justice that is revealed through your Son. I thank you that justice that cost him his entire life that he had to pay the cost of justice in order to be free to give the cost of mercy.

Father, I thank you that we've been given that mercy, and I realize that that mercy has been given to us so that we may proclaim what God has done for us to a world that still sits in darkness. I pray for the grace and the strength and the wisdom to do just that. And I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.