

Proverbs: Just Wisdom

Big Idea: A wise person lives a life of justice and righteousness

Purpose: To convince people that caring for those with less power is at the heart of who God is and how He wants us to live wisely

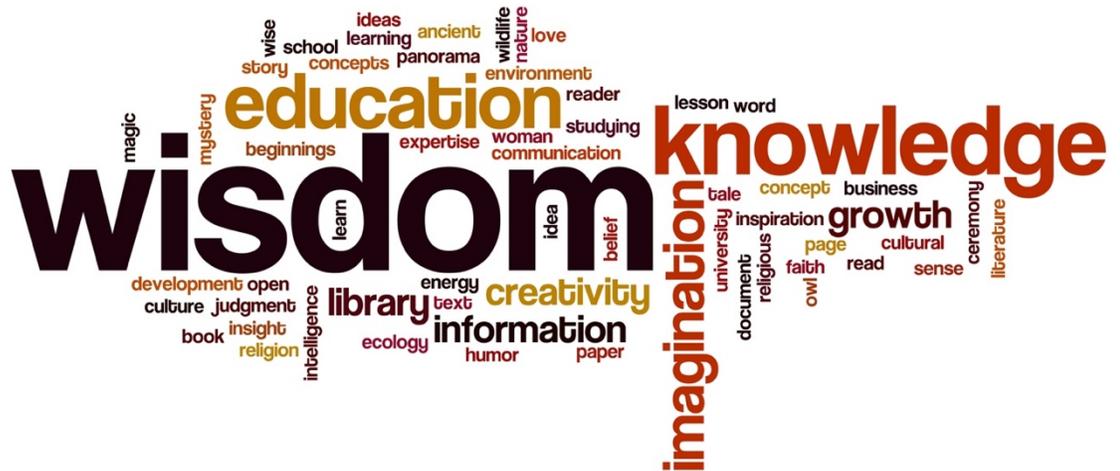
Passage: Proverbs 2:6-9

Verse: Proverbs 1:3

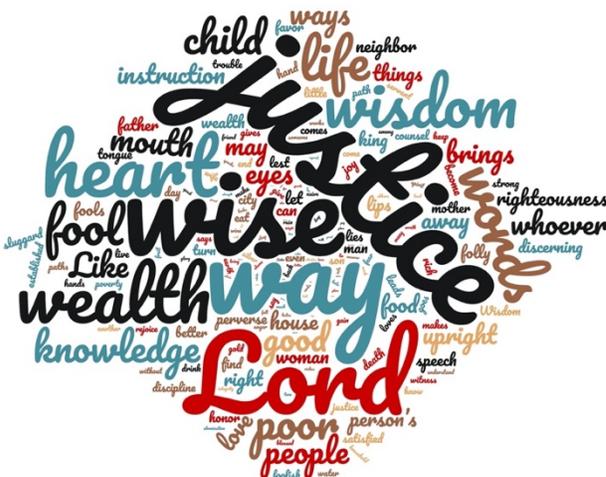
We've been in this series in the book of Proverbs, seeing what the sages have to say about things like wisdom and foolishness, our words and how they affect people, friendship, and money. We want wisdom from the source of wisdom so that we experience—not the good life—but a life that is good. Today we're going to explore what sages say about justice.

Wisdom's a pretty interesting topic because there are a lot of different ideas out there about wisdom. You've probably seen a word cloud before, although you may not have known it. A word cloud takes a grouping of words from a text or certain topic and organizes them in an image based on frequency of use.

So here's a word cloud about general ideas around wisdom.



I created a word cloud based on the vocabulary of the book of Proverbs.



The way that Proverbs,

and the rest of the Bible, describes itself as a wisdom book is quite a bit different than typical ideas. Wisdom is about the way that we live—like John said in the opening sermon in this series, **wisdom is aligning our way with God’s way. And God’s way, as described thoroughly in the Bible, is a way of justice and righteousness.**

Now Justice is one of our six values here at New Hope, so I know for most of you, it’s going to be a familiar concept, but I don’t know what kinds of feelings “justice” elicits in each of you. I recognize that it may be a challenging topic for some. So, if I step on your toes, please forgive me.

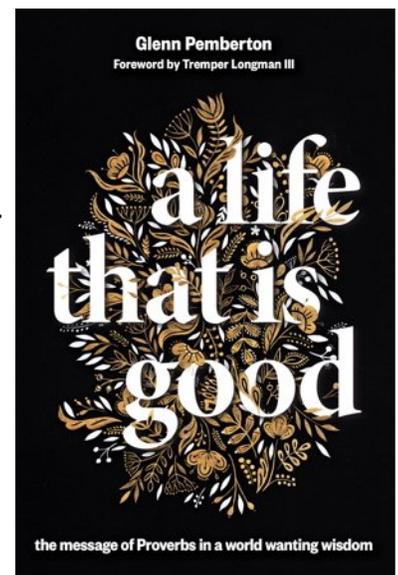
A number of years ago, I was invited to preach at a church in a series that the church was doing on missions; on taking the gospel to the world. I had a loose connection with this church, but I didn’t know its history or its people. I spoke on the relationship between justice and the spoken gospel, that those two things go handinhand. They aren’t distinct opposing things; they’re both an aspect of what God is doing. I finished to many blank stares (much like looking into the camera right now), and a woman came up to me afterwards and said, “I’m really glad you gave that sermon. You know, this church split many years ago over this issue. The other church is right across the street, and it’s still a bit contentious.” Whoops!

Not everybody sees justice the same way.

But one thing is for sure, the sages had a whole lot to say about justice. We’ve been mentioning this book, *A Life That Is Good*, which is a great read to gain some more understanding of the book of Proverbs. The author of that book says, “*Even a fast reading of the text will lead us to recognize that justice is not just one among many equally important principles in Proverbs. Justice is foundational to the composition of wisdom.*”

With that, let’s have our public reading of scripture today, which is provided by Eden and comes from Proverbs chapter two. It addresses this very idea of justice and righteousness.

*For the Lord gives wisdom;
From His mouth come knowledge and understanding.
He stores up sound wisdom for the upright;
He is a shield to those who walk in integrity,*



*Guarding the paths of justice,
And He preserves the way of His godly ones.
Then you will discern righteousness and justice
And equity and every good course.*

PROVERBS 2:6-9 [NASB]

For those who store up the commands of Proverbs, and those who fear the Lord, it says, *Then you will understand what is right and just and fair—every good path. For wisdom will enter your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul,* (Proverbs 2:9-10)

When wisdom enters our hearts—when we allow it to enter our hearts because we find it pleasant—then we will understand righteousness and justice. That’s actually the purpose—the very thing the sages are trying to get across to us!

Take a look at the first words in the book of Proverbs

The proverbs of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel: to know wisdom and instruction, to discern the sayings of understanding, to receive instruction in wise behavior, righteousness, justice and equity,”

Proverbs 1:1-3 (NASB)

Think about this for a moment: What is the purpose of the Proverbs? Is the purpose to teach us the tricks in life that will make us successful? Is the purpose to elevate us above others with all of our wise thinking? Is the purpose for us to have a snappy answer for people in an argument? Is the purpose that we stay out of trouble? Is the purpose of Proverbs primarily to benefit ourselves?

No. The opening verses of the book tell us it’s going to change the way we live, it’s going to change our behavior, and it’s going to do so primarily in how we relate to other people with righteousness, justice, and equity.

In Proverbs, the wise person is characterized as someone who is willing to listen and learn. By reading Proverbs, we should become people who practice righteousness, justice and equity. **A wise person lives a life of justice and righteousness.** (The foolish person ignores justice.) In Proverbs, wisdom is personified as a woman—John has already talked about that. The primary place to see that is in chapter 8, where Lady Wisdom says this of herself, *I walk in the way of righteousness, along the paths of justice.* (Proverbs 8:20)

To walk is to live; the path is the way of life. Wisdom is the way of righteousness and justice

According to the sages, it's better to be just than to be wealthy. Proverbs 16 says, *Better a little with righteousness than much gain with injustice,*" (Proverbs 16:8).

Bryan Stevenson, the author of the book *A Just Mercy*, is a lawyer who for decades has fought for incarcerated people who need an advocate, children who have been tried as adults, or people who have been wrongly imprisoned. He has defended people like Walter McMillian, who is the main focus of the book, and people like Anthony Ray Hinton, who wrote *The Sun Does Shine*, his story of being wrongly imprisoned for 30 years.

Bryan Stevenson said in a 2016 talk, "***The opposite of poverty is not wealth, the opposite of poverty is justice.***"

The sages say it's better to be just than to practice empty religion, as in Proverbs 21, *"To do what is right and just is more acceptable to the LORD than sacrifice,"* (Proverbs 21:3). Treating people with fairness and equity is more important than fulfilling empty religious obligations. Those who pursue God, pursue justice. Proverbs 28:5 declares, *Evil men do not understand justice, but those who seek the LORD understand it completely.*

Proverbs is not the only place in scripture that connects wisdom with righteousness and justice. There are multiple instances of this in scripture, but as an example, let's look at Jeremiah, one of the prophets.

Jeremiah says, *This is what the LORD says: "Let not the wise boast of their wisdom or the strong boast of their strength or the rich boast of their riches, but let the one who boasts boast about this: that they have the understanding to know me, that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight," declares the LORD.* (Jeremiah 9:23-24)

The wisdom a person boasts in is not true wisdom if it doesn't understand **who God is and what He delights in.** He delights in kindness, righteousness and justice

In the Bible, wisdom isn't just great knowledge, it isn't primarily about making choices that lead to success, it isn't purely a compass for my life—**wisdom is living a life of justice and righteousness because your heart is in line with God's heart and your life reflects that alignment. That's wisdom!**

If you're like me, when you've got a tough decision to make, you pray to God for wisdom. When you're in a tough scenario, you pray to God for wisdom to know how to navigate it or get out of it well. Nothing wrong with that—I do that, and I'm going to keep doing that, but if that's where our understanding of wisdom stops, it's very incomplete—**justice and righteousness is wisdom!** That being the case, it's pretty important to understand what justice and righteousness are.

What do you think about when you think of justice? I think about Judge Judy, personally—always the first thing to come to my mind.



We may think about justice:

- In a legal sense, like our justice system—where those who have done wrong face the consequences of their actions
- In cosmic sense that people will get what's coming to them—they'll get what they deserve some day—there's cosmic justice
- Maybe it feels like justice currently is making sure that people on social media know that I think the right thing, and that all the people who don't think like me are wrong, and as long as I can tell them that, that's justice.
- Maybe you think about how we apply it here at New Hope, where Justice is one of our values. That means that we're engaged with the community around and globally to care for the disadvantaged.
- Maybe you think about it in the negative—justice equals “social justice”, which means it's not really the gospel. (similar to that church I preached at years ago)

All of those things are facets of the conversation really.

The Bible has a ton to say about justice—and, honestly, it's really convicting—at least, I think it is. **If you have ears to hear (like Jesus said) what the Bible has to say about justice, it will likely change the way that you live and the way you think about other people.**

I can't change you; this sermon can't change you. **But if you've got ears to hear, what the Bible says about justice will change you.**

Going back to those opening verses of Proverbs, it says that the purpose of the Proverbs is to bring about righteousness, justice, or fairness—we're going

to focus on the two terms: righteousness and justice because these are important terms in the Bible.

The term for *justice* in the Hebrew Bible is ***mishpat***. It can be used in a legal sense—as in a judgement—but also in the sense of an obligation, what one should do, especially when something wrong has been done. It's used more than 400 times in the Hebrew Bible.

Righteousness in the Hebrew Bible is the word ***tzedakah***. It refers to the standard or order that is good or right *within the context of community*. One scholar has defined it as the “right harmony for all.” It's used nearly 300 times in the Old Testament.

These two terms—*tzedakah* and *mishpat*, are used together, in combination with one another, more than 70 times in the Hebrew Bible. **Together, they are both the standard for what is right and the means for bringing about what is right.** They play the role of a significant theme throughout all of scripture, one that begins all way back in Genesis, where God says **about** Abraham,

“For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.” (Genesis 18:19)

The way of the Lord is right and just, and that's why wisdom—living in alignment with God—is righteousness and justice.

There are several nuances to what justice and righteousness are in the Bible, but the overwhelming—and I mean overwhelming—sense of these words together is **to care for those who are vulnerable and disadvantaged in society**. Bruce Waltke, who is a monumental Old Testament scholar, in his commentary on the Proverbs, said, “*The righteous are willing to disadvantage themselves to advantage the community; the wicked are willing to disadvantage the community to advantage themselves.*” What a powerful statement! Some of us have more of an advantage than others. **Wisdom is to see what we have been given and think how we can use it to care for other people.** That's justice.

There are at least 100 passages that I could show to demonstrate that justice and righteousness is to care for the vulnerable and disadvantaged in society, and I'm sure many more than that, but just to give you a sample:

In Job 29, Job is talking about himself taking care of the blind, the lame, the needy, the stranger: *“I put on righteousness as my clothing; justice was my robe and my turban. I was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame. I was a father to the needy; I took up the case of the stranger.”* (Job 29:14-16)

Zechariah says, *“This is what the LORD Almighty said: ‘Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor. Do not plot evil against each other.’* (Zechariah 7:9-10)

This passage from Zechariah is a good one for us to look at because **it highlights the kind of people who need justice: the widow, the orphan, the foreigner, and the poor.** These are people who were vulnerable in that society—and frankly they’re still vulnerable in our society today.

The idea here, though, isn’t that these are the specific categories of people that we need to be showing special care for—it’s that these are vulnerable people, and it’s vulnerable people who need care. Who is vulnerable in our society today? Who is disadvantaged in our society today? Who is in need of justice in our society today? **The sages have people in those circumstances in mind when they say wisdom is living a life of justice and righteousness.**

I think about my mom when I think about the vulnerable. She’s tough and she’s smart, but she’s vulnerable. She has faced so much injustice in her life. I won’t tell you those stories because they’re hers to tell, but hardship after hardship. As a single mom, raising four kids, working multiple jobs, going to school, facing mistreatment—she needed justice; she was the vulnerable.

So what do we need to do to live this life of justice and righteousness? How do we live this wisdom now?

First, the key to wisdom is to **Be willing to listen and learn**—to see other perspectives. Proverbs 4 says, *“Hold on to instruction, do not let it go; guard it well, for it is your life,”* (Proverbs 4:13) That is, **be willing to learn!**

As I said already, a challenge when talking about justice is that **not everyone sees justice the same way.** You can’t get around the fact that the Bible has a strong emphasis on justice. There’s no doubt that followers of Jesus should be living a life of justice. **But what we perceive justice to be is formed and shaped by our political leanings, by our upbringings, by our church backgrounds, by so many things around us.**

So when we think about aspects of life that relate to justice, we have different responses. Some of them are easier, like caring for widows and orphans. Are any of you not in favor of caring for widows and orphans? But some issues are not so easy; things like racial justice, healthcare, immigration (am I touching a nerve yet??), the under-housed, equality for women, abortion, corporal punishment, war. Now, whatever you think about those issues (or whatever you think about me at this point for bringing them up), they have to be filtered through what the Bible says about justice and righteousness—which is primarily about caring for the vulnerable and disadvantaged. But in order for us to filter those topics, or any number of circumstances that you face, through a Biblical ethic, **we have to be willing to learn. We have to, once again, have ears to hear what is being said.**

Many of us not only need to hear what the Bible says about this, **but we also need to hear what other people have to say about it.** We have to hear from the people who have gone through struggles, who have felt injustice. I can tell you that I have faced only small amounts of trivial injustice in my life. I am not particularly disadvantaged in our society; I have privilege; which I know can be a trigger word for some, but I can't deny it. So I need to learn from people who have experienced injustice, so that I can attempt to see things from a different perspective.

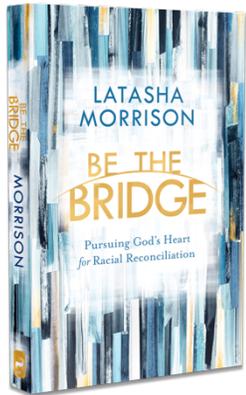
The second thing about living this wisdom now is to: **Apply it to our real world.** Don't keep it in the theoretical. **Wisdom is not meant to live in your head. It's meant to be lived.** Remember, it's a way of life. So think about where there is injustice now and what you can do to live that wisdom.

One of the most significant things happening right now in our society is the call for racial justice. Today will be the 88th straight day of protests and riots in Portland since the death of George Floyd.

For followers of Jesus, the foundation for justice in this issue is that every person is made in the image of God, but as a society we don't treat everybody that way. James 3 says, *"With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be."* (James 3:9-10)

There is not one person more valuable than another; that's why black lives matter. Now I know by saying that, some of you may bristle a bit because that phrase is tied to politics, which, remember, affects the way that we view

justice. But this goes back to the last point that wisdom requires a willingness to listen and learn.



If the phrase ‘black lives matter’ is a stumbling block for you, I would encourage to read a book like *Be the Bridge* by Latasha Morrison to understand why dismissing a phrase like that can be hurtful to a person of color.

Even more so, I would encourage you to read that book to understand **how to live just wisdom in the context of racial inequality**. Morrison walks the reader through a process of righting the wrongs of racial inequality by:

- Being aware of the truth
- Empathizing and lamenting with others
- Working through shame and guilt
- Confessing sin
- Seeking and extending forgiveness
- Repenting
- Righting the wrong
- Finding Restoration

I’ve got to be honest with you, I’m not an expert in this area. I’m even nervous to talk about it today, because I’m afraid I’m going to say something that’s offensive to somebody, either to a person of color or to someone else who’s trying to learn and understand what their place is in the racial justice conversation. I’m afraid I’m going to be canceled today!

But I know I can’t ignore it. If I am going to live a life of wisdom, a life of justice and righteousness, the Bible tells me that I cannot ignore this issue, because I have advantage that can be leveraged for those who are disadvantaged. As Latasha Morrison says in *Be the Bridge*, “*Repairing what’s broken is a distinctly biblical concept, which is why as people of faith we should be leading the way into redemption, restoration, and reconciliation.*”

This brings me to the third way to live a life of wisdom now: **Use your resources to help others**. That is a foundational concept of justice. Some

people have more than others, whether it's more money, more power or authority, more opportunity, more education, more resources, **and the Bible tells us to be generous with what we have.**

If you have more money, Proverbs says, *"Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will reward them for what they have done."* (Proverbs 19:17)

If you have more power or authority, Proverbs says, *"Speak up for those who have no voice, for the justice of all who are dispossessed. Speak up, judge righteously, and defend the cause of the oppressed and needy."* (Proverbs 31:8-9)

Just as Abraham was blessed by God in order to be a blessing to all the nations, so also **what God has provided for me is not solely for me, but for the benefit of those around me.**

Sometimes this is done with a simple act. I'll never forget when I was in high school and I was on the football team. My mom was in school, raising four kids on her own, so we did not have a lot of money. Every Saturday when there was a football game, the team would go out to breakfast. I remember sitting there with the team one time, not having enough money for breakfast, and the owner of the restaurant bringing out a huge plate of waffles, whipped cream, and berries for me to eat.

Tim Keller, a prominent author and pastor said on this topic, *"If you are a Christian and you have resources and you're not practicing radical generosity, you're not being stingy, you're being unjust."* Yikes!

I think we all understand the temptation to hold on to what we have, whether that's our money, our position, our advantage, or anything else—or at least, I know that temptation—but we have to fight against that, **because Old Testament to New, from the Law of Moses to the words of Jesus, we are told to use our resources to help others.**

The last thing I'll say to practice the wisdom of justice and righteousness is to **Remember compassion.** It's a simple one, but it's so easily overlooked. Although the word *mishpat* (justice) has to do with an obligation, **justice itself is not best practiced as an obligation but as an act of compassion.**

When there is someone in need, someone who is hurting, someone who is disadvantaged, someone who is poor or marginalized, **our response as we're being formed into the image of Christ should be that of Christ himself: one**

of compassion. When Jesus saw the lost and the hurting, he had compassion, and he healed them and he cared for them.

If any of the topics I've brought up today has upset you, stop and ask yourself who needs compassion in that scenario. We may not agree on how to approach every problem of injustice, or we may not agree with what each side might be saying, but seeing a person through a lens of compassion can have a big impact on how we think about injustice.

And you can't force that on yourself. We need to be formed more into who Christ is through scripture, through prayer, and through an openness to the Spirit of God in order to have His compassion in us. **And that goes for His wisdom too, because all the treasures of knowledge and wisdom are hidden in Christ. When His wisdom is formed in us, we will walk compassionately with justice and righteousness.**