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The Prophet Jeremiah

V. Boast in This Jeremiah 9:23-24

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“But let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me . . .” Therein lies the first grace, the first gift of our God towards us spelled out in this passage: that we can know Him, that He does indeed permit Himself to be known by His creatures. The Lord God Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, could just as easily have chosen to remain hidden behind the veil of His divinity – the Deists’ watchmaker God, unknown and unknowable. But instead – and, again, grace upon grace, gift above all gifts – God has chosen instead to reveal Himself to us. In His Word, through His works, and ultimately through His self-revelation in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. *“Let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me.”*

But also, grace upon grace and gift above all gifts, not just are we able to know God, but through His self-revelation to us we are able to comprehend what our God is like, what our God values and practices and upholds. *“But let him who boasts boast in this . . . that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth.”* What is our God like, what does He value and practice and uphold in His Creation? Steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth.

Steadfast love. Steadfast – meaning not waxing and waning, but ever constant and strong. Steadfast – meaning certain and sure despite the behavior of the ones who are the object of His love. Steadfast – meaning as deep as the ocean, as high as the heavens. Steadfast love – meaning disposed towards us in kindness and favor. Steadfast love – meaning that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all. Steadfast love – meaning, as Jesus Himself spoke it, incarnated it, accomplished it, that *“God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”*¹ Steadfast love – a God willing to go through death upon a cross just so that we, His beloved, should be saved from our sins and dwell with Him forevermore.

Years ago, a French journalist named Dominique Lapierre wrote an extraordinary book describing life in the horrible slums of Mother Theresa’s Calcutta in India. The book was titled The City of Joy. In one scene in the book, Lapierre describes two lepers – a Hindu man and young girl – who have come to visit with a Catholic priest in his one room shack in the heart of Calcutta’s slums – his place of mission. Behind the priest, tacked to the wall, hangs a picture of the crucified Christ – His face distorted with the anguish and sorrow of His suffering. The two Hindu lepers, the man and the young girl, have before seen such a thing. They ask the priest why this Jesus seems so sad. The priest answers:

He has suffered . . . He is suffering because of me, you, all of us; because of our sins, because of the evil that we do. Still he loves us so much that he forgives us. He wants us to look at him . . . And to love him. And to do as he does and forgive and love everyone, especially those who suffer like him.²

As he finishes speaking, the young girl – clad in nothing but filthy rags, the suffering of leprosy written all over her body – the young girl moves forward and kisses the picture of Jesus. “How he must suffer,” she says in a whisper. The other leper, the man, has begun weeping, and through his tears he says to the priest, “Your Jesus is most beautiful.”³ “Let him who boasts boast in this . . . that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love.”

And justice. To us justice is first and foremost fairness in the courts of law; and then, also, fairness in matters of commerce and common dealing. And certainly God upholds justice conceived as fairness. Do not steal, He commands, and do not bear false witness. But the justice of our God is far more than fairness – far more creative and restorative and far-reaching than merely fairness. In fact, God’s justice is so creative and restorative and far-reaching that it can often be seen as being so utterly unfair by our standards of justice that the only real word for it is “grace.”

For justice, as God defines it and practices it in His world, is not really about equal standing before the law, so much as it is about equal compassion and concern for the welfare of all human beings – and even special compassion and concern for those in our midst who are weak and without voice, who are powerless, who are oppressed, who are economically disadvantaged and discarded. God, in His practice of justice, expresses special favor – a tilting of the scales – towards those who are by this world shoved to the margins, those who are treated in this world as if they do not matter, as if they were disposable. The justice practiced by our God treats all people with respect, honors the dignity and humanity of even those we would consider to be the least among us. More even than that, the justice of God shows special concern, special favor, a special willingness to rebalance the scales of fairness in favor of those who are most vulnerable among us.

Listen to the prophets – for they speak of this aspect of God’s justice over and over again:

Thus says the Lord of hosts, Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another, do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor, and let none of you devise evil against another in your heart.⁴

*Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker,
but he who is generous to the needy honors him.⁵*

*Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of wickedness,
to undo the straps of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,*

*and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your food with the hungry
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover him,
and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?
Then shall your light break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up speedily . . .*⁶

And let us not forget the words of God Himself as He walked among us on this earth:

Then the King will say to those on his right, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, and I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me." Then the righteous will answer him, saying, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?" And the King will answer them, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me."⁷

Justice – more than fairness. God’s justice: compassion and concern and outreaching care for those who live at the bottom of the ladder. *“Let him who boasts boast in this . . . that I am the Lord who practices . . . justice.”*

And righteousness. Righteousness in the Bible has a complex meaning – too broad for a single sermon perhaps. But the best way to pull all the nuances of righteousness in the Bible together into one definition is to say that righteousness – God’s righteousness – is concerned with restoring right-relationship between God and His people, first of all; and second, restoring right relationship among His people, binding them one to another in His family of faith. In other words, God’s righteousness is ultimately about reversing what went wrong in the Fall. All humankind, in the form of our primordial parents, Adam and Eve, broke off our right relationship with God. We were meant to walk in easy intimacy with our God – but instead we turned away from Him in sin, breaking our relationship with Him into pieces, turning intimacy with God into estrangement from God.⁸ Remember that picture of God in the Garden of Eden calling out to Adam and Eve after they had turned away from Him – God calling out to them, *“Where are you?”*⁹ Estrangement in place of intimacy.

And God’s righteousness is God – through Israel, first; and ultimately and finally in Jesus Christ – God restoring our right relationship with Himself, restoring intimacy with Him in place of our sinful estrangement from Him. All that He should again be our God and that we should again be *“the people of His pasture, and the flock of His hand.”*¹⁰ The Apostle Paul writes to the Ephesians, *“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.”*¹¹ Or, as we read in I John a few weeks ago: *“See what kind of love the Father*

has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are . . . Beloved, we are God's children now."¹² And remember how the happily-ever-after of the Book of Revelation describes God's final restoration of right relationship with us forevermore in His heavenly Kingdom: "*Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes.*"¹³ God's righteousness means the restoration of right relationship between Himself and you and me.

But also the restoration of right-relationship between you and me and all the rest of God's children. Back in the Fall story in Genesis, what immediately follows the breaking of Adam and Eve's relationship with God is the breaking of our relationship with one another – the story of Cain murdering his brother Abel.¹⁴ Brother against brother, human being divided from human being. So God's righteousness is not just about restoring us to right relationship with Him, but also restoring us to right relationship with each other. Remember that there are two Great Commandments – that we should love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength (right relationship restored with God), but also that we should love our neighbor as ourselves (right relationship restored with one another).¹⁵ And the place where we most can see God's righteousness restoring our right relationships is in God's gift to us and work among us which is the Body of Christ, the Church. On the day of Pentecost, God's Holy Spirit was given to us – and what that gift meant, what resulted from its being given was, first and foremost, the church:

*And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common . . . And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all people.*¹⁶

God's righteousness, overcoming our estrangement from God Himself, and overcoming our estrangement from one another. Healing in place of hurt, reconciliation in place of guilt and resentment and anger, peace in place of hatred. God's righteousness accomplishes that between ourselves and Him; and, if we will let His righteousness work in us and through us, accomplishing that also in our relationships with one another, in all the earth. "*Let him who boasts boast in this . . . that I am the Lord who practices . . . righteousness in the earth.*"

So, grace upon grace, gift above all gifts, that you and I are able to know and understand right now the One who has made us and all things, the One who will be waiting for us when our time on earth is done, the One who is with us even in this very moment, practicing among us and through us His steadfast love, His creative justice, His restorative righteousness: "*But let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and know me.*" Grace upon grace, gift above all gifts, that the God we come to understand and know – through His Word, His works, and finally and fully through the appearing of His Son Jesus Christ – is a God who is wondrously good, endlessly kind, and ultimately victorious in all the earth. And also, so we pray, good and kind and ultimately victorious within our own individual lives: "*But let him who boasts boast in this, that he*

understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the Lord.”

But, of course, that last line takes us back up to the start of our passage. *“For in these things I delight, declares the Lord”* serves to reinforce what God said to us at the very beginning of this passage – that we, therefore, ought not to delight in that in which God does not delight. But instead live our lives in a God-ward and God-delighting manner – such that we are at all times learning to delight in the same things in which God delights, learning to practice in our own lives the same things which God is practicing among us – steadfast love, justice, and righteousness: *“Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me.”* “Understands and knows me” meaning also that we learn from Him how to live, what to value. That we seek to glorify Him by practicing in our lives that which He delights in, that which He Himself practices in all the earth.

Now there’s a whole other sermon right there. But instead let’s end with a picture – a picture of the person who has learned to boast only in understanding and knowing the God of steadfast love, justice, and righteousness. A person who has learned to delight, above all else, in those same things in which God delights. It’s a picture drawn by Eugene Peterson, his description of the proper posture of a happy, and holy, human life: *“Arms lifted high towards heaven, open to what we cannot grasp, receptive to God, our lives a chalice into which God pours grace.”*¹⁷ Life your arms heavenward with me and I’ll say it again: *“Arms lifted high towards heaven, open to what we cannot grasp, receptive to God, our lives a chalice into which God pours grace.”*

Our lives delighting in the God who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in all the earth, and in your life and mine.

¹ John 3:16.

² Dominique Lapierre, *The City of Joy* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1985), p. 143.

³ Lapierre, p. 144.

⁴ Zechariah 7:9-10.

⁵ Proverbs 14:31.

⁶ Isaiah 58:5-8.

⁷ Matthew 25:34-40.

⁸ Genesis 3:1-24.

⁹ Genesis 3:9.

¹⁰ Psalm 95:7

¹¹ Ephesians 2:13.

¹² I John 3:1-2.

¹³ Revelation 21:3-4.

¹⁴ Genesis 4:1-16.

¹⁵ Matthew 22:34-40, Luke 10:25-28.

¹⁶ Acts 2:42-47.

¹⁷ Anneke Kaai and Eugene H. Peterson, *In a Word . . .* (Brewster, Mass.: Paraclete Press, 2003), p. 13.