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TOTALLY JUST!

Guest Speaker: Paul Penelton

Hi my name is Paul and for those of you who've been away, I'm the new guy! I'll mostly be looking after the youth and college students at T.O.B. but I also get to help Ken and the staff out wherever I can which includes preaching on day's like today. And fortunately for me, I get to speak on a topic that is near and dear to my heart: Justice!

When I was a little boy, I used to get up at 7am every Saturday morning, get dressed and run over to my best friend Sean Murphy's to watch cartoons. He was the rich kid on the block and they had something most of us didn't have until we were teenagers...cable. Cable equalled cartoons. And for the guys on our street the only cartoon worth watching was the "Justice League."

The Justice League was made up of Superman, The Flash, The Green Lantern, Aquaman, and my personal favourite...Batman! Batman was my favourite because he was an actual human. He didn't have any fancy alien-type superpowers like Superman or a special outer-space ring that could take any shape like the Green Lantern. Everything that made Batman special he either trained for or created on his own. He was a superhero that anyone could aspire to become. And being a hero is something we all aspired to become.

Have you ever asked yourself why that is? Why do we need to become heroes? What compels us to want to reach out and help someone in need? Why is it that almost every human being longs for justice – unless, of course, they're on the wrong side of it? It's like there is a scale of justice within each of our souls that is constantly balancing the fairness in each situation we encounter. We intrinsically know unfair from fair. We expect fairness in our lives.

We expect umpires and referees to be fair. We expect that teachers will be fair. We expect that government will make fair decisions and enact fair and just laws. We expect that, if we are stopped by the police, that they will be fair with us.

Illustration

A number of years ago, the LA times carried a story about a guy named David Hagler. David was apparently test-driving a little sports car when he was stopped by a law enforcement officer who, in spite of David's pleading, wrote him a very expensive ticket. David was livid. He didn't think it was fair that he, among all the other speeding vehicles, was caught. He claimed he was barely exceeding the speed limit and that he was normally a very cautious. He begged

the officer to let him off and promised him that he would pay more attention to his speed from here on out.

But the hard-nosed cop wouldn't budge. David had to pay a heavy fine and he anticipated that his insurance rates would surely rise. David felt victimized and helpless until a few months later. Apparently Hagler used to moonlight as an umpire in a softball league. As he called out the traditional "play ball" to start the game. He noticed a familiar face coming to the plate. It was the police officer who had written him up. The police officer's hard edge suddenly softened. He said to Hagler, "Hey buddy, how did the ticket thing work out." Hagler smiled as he looked at him and said, "You'd better swing at everything!"

When our kids find that they get fewer privileges, or have to go to bed earlier, or have more chores than their friends they have a favourite saying. Do you know what it is? "It's not fair!" And of course, they grow up thinking that once they get out on their own, once they get to set their own rules and standards, then life will be fair. But within a few weeks, or months out on their own they suddenly realize the grass isn't any greener where they are.

The opening words of Scott Peck's book "The Road Less Travelled" describe what we've all discovered; "Life is difficult." All you have to do is read the newspapers, watch a little of the news, and you easily come to the conclusion that we live in a world that seems unable to achieve any kind of justice (Pastor in Alberta who's son was shot)

The struggle for those who are in the midst of the battle is that God seems strangely silent or absent in the boardrooms where corporate greed is not only evident but is planned, in the back alleys of our world where cruelty is practiced and in the thousands of files of unsolved murders, rapes, thefts and assaults in police headquarters around the world.

Sometimes, people wrongly conclude that God either doesn't exist or worse, He doesn't care. And the question that inevitably comes up while you're in the middle of crisis is "Where's God?" "Couldn't He just make my life more fair or just?" An author by the name of Mark Buchanan asked that very question in his book "Your God is Too Safe."

In it, he tells the story of a little girl in his town named Kaitlyn who, at the age of four, was found lying on the grass in the playground – limp and unresponsive. As doctors did tests, she become more and more pale. Her speech slurred and she started walking into things. Over time, the news came that Kaitlyn has a rare sickness called "Batten's Disease – and it was killing her. Her muscles began to petrify and her pain increased. Her parents, who were

Christians, were constantly praying for a miracle. They attended a church of caring people who were also praying daily.

Let me read to you from the book so you can better understand the unfairness of the situation. *“I soon found out that the people who live next door to Kaitlyn won the lottery, more than six hundred thousand dollars. I know almost nothing about these people except that they have a lovely house. The house, I was told, is already paid for. It has been for a long time. These people, I understand had a good, abundant life even before their jackpot win. I’m not sure why they buy lottery tickets or, if they don’t, why others buy lottery tickets for them. I’m not sure if they ever prayed to win the lottery or if they pray at all. But they won more than six hundred thousand dollars in the lottery and in the house next door, a little girl named Kaitlyn is dying. Life isn’t fair.”*

Now to be honest, when I read that story my first thought was that maybe God just got the wrong address. But then I quickly realized that God doesn’t make mistakes, that God IS just, that God IS fair, and that God IS right. Moses, who was far more spiritual than I’ll ever be, saw this side of God in spite of the dire circumstances of his people. Can you imagine seeing the incredible injustice of an entire nation forced into slave labour? But Moses response was different than most. Here’s what he saw according to **Deuteronomy 32:3-4**, in one of the few songs that he ever wrote:

“I will proclaim the name of the Lord. Oh, praise the greatness of our God! He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he.”

By the time we’re done today, my prayer is that your confidence in God will go up, that your heart will long for that day when every wrong will be made right and that you and I will learn to be ambassadors for Christ in our quest to help the poor and the marginalized in our society.

1. The Reason: How did the world get so messed up?

But I think before we go any further we need to answer this fundamental question: How did the world get so messed up? I mean you don’t have to look too far to see that not everything in the world is good. Not everyone in the world is happy. Not everything in the world is beautiful. In fact, real evil does exist in the world.

The evidence is overwhelming. You can pick up any newspaper and go through each section and find it. If you go to the international section you will find terrorism, war and genocide. If you go to the national section you’re going to find political payoffs and lies and scams. If you go through the local section you’re going to find rapes, murders and arson. You

go through the business section and you'll find fraud, theft and embezzlement. You can even go through the sports section now and find drug use, gambling and adultery. Don't even dare going through the entertainment section there are just too many scandals and sin to even mention.

How did evil come into such a beautiful creation? Well, it all started back in the Garden of Eden with the very first couple Adam and Eve. The Bible (**Romans 5:12**) says this,

“Therefore, sin entered the world through one man and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned.” There was no death prior to this but came into the world through sin. And it didn't just stop at Adam and Eve. We're all culprits too. The apostle Paul wrote “There is not a single person in all the earth who is always good and never sins.” That includes me. That includes you. That includes the pope and even Mother Theresa. It includes everybody who's ever lived. So the reason the world's in such a mess is because of sin.

The result of this is that we live in a fallen world, a broken planet. In other words, everything on this planet has been damaged, injured, spoiled, and corrupted in some way by the entry of evil into the world. A lot of people don't understand this and that's why they ask this question, “Why is this happening to me?”

When they ask that question, it's because they don't have the worldview that we live in a fallen world. The reason it's happening is because the world is no longer perfect. In fact the world's a mess. So why doesn't our loving, compassionate, and all-powerful God just pull the plug on the planet? Why does He put up with it? He's got the power to shut it down. Why is He allowing a broken planet to limp along for a little longer? The reason is that although the world is broken, God is still in control. And history is moving toward a climax. History is HIS STORY. And God has three reasons for not shutting it down. You need to understand this. You need to know this.

2. The Rationale: Why does God let it continue?

The first reason is to give us a choice. Allowing sin in the world hurts God but it gives us a clear-cut choice. In **Deuteronomy 30:15**, God says, **“Today, I'm giving you a choice between good and evil, between life and death.”** Here's the point. God made you in his image. You are not an animal. You are a human being. That means you have a free moral choice. Animals don't have any choice. They live by instinct but you have a conscious. God says, “I want you to choose to love Me. I don't want to force you to love Me. I'm not the master

of puppets. I'm not going to force you to be a puppet. You can either love Me or not love Me. But I want you to choose.

That's the good news. Here's the bad news. You must be willing to live with the consequences of that choice. While you are free to choose anything you want to do in life, you are never free from the consequences. You are free to leave this service and get liquored up but you are not free from the consequences of it. You are free to go cheat on your wife but you are not free from the consequences of it. If you want to turn your back on God and live your entire life doing your own thing, you are free to make that choice. But you've got to be willing to live with the consequences for eternity. Because that's the choice. The Bible says that God gives you this choice in **Ecclesiastes 3:17**, "**In due season God will judge everything man does both good and bad.**" There's going to be a day of accounting where you explain to God why you made the choices on earth that you did.

The second reason why God let's the world continue in this mess is to show us our need for a Saviour. What do I mean by that? The worse the world gets the more we realize that we need God. In fact that's true in everyone's life. The more messed up your life gets the more you start realizing you have a need for God.

The bible says this, "God allows people to continue in their sinful ways, so He can test them. That way they can see for themselves that they're no better than animals." What does he mean by that? He's saying that without God in your life you tend to degenerate and start acting by instinct like an animal.

In other words, God is saying there are people in this world who have no conscious. They will say anything to you to get you into bed. Or they will say anything to you to make you buy something that they're selling. Or they, like Hitler or Mussolini, will commit acts of genocide and murder to gain power.

Human nature says we don't think we need God. My sinful nature tells me, "I don't need God. I don't need Him telling me what to do. I can handle this life on my own. I don't think God has my best interests at heart. I don't really think he loves me. So I'll just go ahead and do what I want to do."

What happens when we allow our sinful nature to guide us? Broken heart, broken body, broken dreams, broken promises, broken memories. God says, "These commandments and principles are not for My benefit, there for you." It's because I love you. What happens when we allow our children to do whatever they want? Chaos.

What they want is not what they need? Only someone who loves you will guide you towards what you need. You say why do I need a Saviour? What am I being saved from? The answer is sin. The disease of sin, like a poison, is eating you up from the inside out and you don't even know it. Jesus is the only known antidote to sin. He is the way to eternal life. But as we will find out momentarily, the decision is like a scene out of the Matrix where Neo is asked whether he wants to stay in the dark or see the truth.

The third reason God allows this diseased place to carry on is to demonstrate His grace. The Bible says in **2 Peter 3:9**, **“The Lord isn't being slow about His promise to return as some people think. No, He's being patient for your sake. He does not want anyone to perish. So He's giving more time for everyone to repent.”**

The reason God puts up with all the grief that He sees on this planet is because He's being patient. And He's waiting for you to step across the line and come to know Him. He wants you in His family. Or if you're in His family, He wants you telling your family and friends and neighbours because He wants them in the family too. So God says I'm waiting a little bit longer just so people have the opportunity to receive My grace.

This is the implication: When somebody comes to you and says, “I can't believe in a God or I can't worship a God or I can't love a God who would callously stand by, unmoved, and watch little children suffer or a woman raped.” Here's what you say, “I don't believe in that kind of God either. In fact, you have no idea how much it hurts God when He sees all the sin on earth. It hurts Him more than anyone else. And He weeps and He grieves and He says, “Look at what my children are doing! They're killing each other! They are abusing each other! They are lying to each other! They're cheating each other! And He hurts. And He grieves. And He hates what he is seeing!

I believe in a God who one day is going to stop evil dead in its tracks. There's going to be an accounting. The Bible says that one day He's going to shut down this planet and He's going to judge all evil and all evil doers with a holy wrath of justice to settle the score. He's going to bring those who love Him and are His children, who put their faith in Him, to a perfect place called Heaven. That's what God's going to do.

The only reason He's holding back His fierce, angry judgment on evil and what it's done to the people He created and loves is that He's waiting for those of us who need to turn our lives around or repent. He's waiting for all the ones He knows are going to say yes to choose. So he puts up with pain and grief and all kinds of problems in this world because he desperately wants everyone to believe that the bridge to God is found on the cross, it's found in Jesus Christ.

He sent His Son to die for you. Jesus Christ is the greatest superhero who ever walked the earth. He's not only able to leap tall buildings in a single bound or stop a bullet with his breath but more importantly He is able to bring justice to an unjust world. If you want to make that choice today and join God's family, please come talk to me or one of the members of our prayer team at the close of this service. For those who've already made that decision. You may be asking this question, "So what do I do while God is patiently waiting? How should I respond as a Christian?"

You see this is where I believe there has been a fundamental misunderstanding about Jesus' message in our day. People have gotten the idea that Jesus' gospel – His good news – is primarily about how to get ready for life on the other side of death. This misunderstanding has had the devastating consequence of keeping many people from seeking to experience God's presence in their lives here and now.

Karen Mains, writes about a Sunday School teacher who wondered if her class understood the gospel, so she asked them: If I sold my house and car, had a big garage sale and gave all my money to the church, would that get me into heaven? No! If I cleaned the church every day and kept everything neat and tidy, would that get me into heaven? No! Well, if I was kind to animals and gave candy to all the children would that get me into heaven? No! When then, how can I get into heaven? A five year old boy shouted out, "You gotta be dead!"

Here's the difficulty: If you gotta be dead, then the gospel doesn't have much to do with today. However, when we look closely at what Jesus calls His Good News, he does it in terms of something that happens after you die. He speaks of something that happens on this side of heaven.

The good news Jesus announced was simply this: God has invaded our world and is making his presence and power available to anybody who wants him. Right here. Right now. The tragic truth is that many people have exchanged Jesus' "Gospel of Life with God Here and Now" for a gospel that doesn't kick in until later: "You gotta be dead."

The problem is that nowhere in the New Testament does Jesus say, "Now, I'm going to give you the minimal requirements you have to meet so that you can get into heaven when you die." He doesn't. Jesus' gospel does include forgiveness of our sins as a gift of grace. It includes the promise that death will not have the last word, that our eternal life with God will never cease.

But it includes more than that. Not only did Jesus invade our world, but he told his followers that they were to devote their lives to his project. In his most famous prayer he said

we are to pray, “Our father in heaven, hallowed by your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

Sometimes people pray a version of the Star Trek prayer to Scottie: “Beam me up.” But Jesus never told anybody – neither his disciples nor us – to pray. “Get me out of here so I can go up there.” His prayer was, “Make up there come down here.” God didn’t reveal himself as Jesus just to make us happy or to deliver us from loneliness. He also comes to us so that we can in turn be conduits of his presence to other people. He invites us to join him in making things down here the way they are up there.

3. My Response: What is my responsibility as a Christian?

So what is my responsibility as a Christian? Are ready for this? Your responsibility is to become a hero. Your responsibility is to make Jesus’ mission your mission. His mission was to save the world through him. I want to spend the rest of our time fleshing out what hero acts like.

There is a passage found in the little book of **Micah** that truly summarizes what God expects of us. It’s found in chapter **6 (verses 6-8)** and it says this: “***With what shall I come before the Lord and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? TO ACT JUSTLY, AND TO LOVE MERCY, AND TO WALK HUMBLY WITH YOUR GOD.***”

It really sounds simple doesn’t it? “Act justly, love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” It’s almost as if Micah invented the “Scouts Oath.” Be fair. Be nice. Be humble. But when you study the context of those words, you realize it’s much deeper than a pithy motto.

To understand Micah’s words, you need to understand God’s relationship with the Jews. When God, through Moses leadership, led the people out of bondage to the Promised Land, He established a covenant with the Hebrew people by saying: “I will be your God and you will be my people.”

But a covenant relationship is a two-way street where both parties have responsibilities or required behaviours that sustain the relationship. We see it today at weddings where two people promise to love each other, to care for each, for better or for worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, ‘til death do us part.”

The reason we agree to do these things is because of the love that the two parties have for each other. God made this type of covenant with the Hebrew people. And God added a little reminder to this covenant in **Leviticus 6:12** when he said, **“Be careful that you do not forget the Lord, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.”**

God said once you get to the Promised Land and begin to enjoy a life of freedom and the abundance of that land, don't forget the things we agreed upon, the things that will sustain our relationship. When you are free, fat and happy remember me. God knew, just like in marriages today, that His people would forget their vows.

Micah preached during one of those periods of history when things were going well for the Hebrew nation politically and economically. But it was a nation that was beginning to rot from the inside out because of the greed of the politicians and the apathy of the people.

Here's the way one scholar described it: “The situation of ordinary citizens was of great concern to Micah. He felt compassion for the poor and the dispossessed, and held the leaders responsible for their suffering.” Micah was condemning the leaders of his people for the injustices perpetuated against the poor and the powerless. Their response was a collective yawn.

They said, “Hey, we are good Jews. We go to the temple every Sabbath and tithe. What does God expect from us anyway?” And that is the question Micah helps answer for us too! What are Christians supposed to do in this messed up world? And the answer is to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God as we wait for Judgment Day.

What did “acting justly” mean to the Hebrews? It meant never allowing people to be treated as a slave ever again. It meant never allowing anyone to be denied basic needs and rights that would allow them to function as a member of the community. God's covenant requires the people whom God delivered from slavery never to treat others as they had been treated in Egypt. To do so would be to violate the very covenant that Moses had made with God.

If we truly say we love God and value our commitment to our relationship then it is our duty to act justly and be the voice of the poor and the needy. And, as is so often evident in Scripture as well as human experience, such a practice of justice most often brings one into conflict with those who are the perpetrators of injustice, and that makes doing justice an act of courage as well as an act of devotion to God.

God also requires not only to act justly but also to love mercy. Now, as a man, I have to admit that it is not natural for me to love mercy. One of my favourite games as a youngster was, in fact, a game called “mercy.” Perhaps you played. It’s a game that involves locking your fingers together with another person and then inflict as much pain on your opponent by jamming his/her wrists as far back as they could go until one of you cried “mercy.” To have mercy was not part of my game plan.

God is asking us here to demonstrate “hesed” which is an even greater form of mercy than the English language can express. It’s probably better translated as “loving devotion” or “steadfast love.” To love “hesed” was to be committed to a quality of life that was governed by the principles of mutual respect, helpfulness, and loving concern. It involves never allowing anyone in our community to be hated or ignored.

The final piece of the covenant agreement is to walk humbly with God. “Walking humbly with a God is a call to do more than to come to God asking for favours, or petitioning for him to fix something that’s broken in our lives. It is probably best visualized by picturing a child walking hand in hand with their dad.

Do you remember what that felt like? As a boy, to hold my dad’s hand while walking was the best feeling in the world. It was safe, it was warm, and it was empowering. I felt as if I could climb any mountain with him by my side. I always felt like he knew where we needed to go and that we would always get there. You know what the best part of walking with my dad was? Being with him. To know that he didn’t need you but chose to be with you, was the greatest feeling in the world. God is asking you and he’s asking me to be with Him.

To walk with God, the Father means to let Him lead. It implies a “sensitivity” to the things of God. To allow our hearts to be broken by the things that would break the heart of God. It is a deep desire to see the world through the eyes of God, to act in the world as God would act. When this final requirement is placed alongside the first two, walking humbly with God becomes synonymous with having a heart for justice and acts of mercy.

What does the Lord require of you? The God who led the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt and into the Promised Land requires that the people who have been so blessed be a blessing to others. To walk with God means to live a life of steadfast love for others, especially those whom Jesus called “the least of these.” As Christians who have received the gracious gift of God’s love, we too have been delivered from slavery. We have been set free from the chains of sin and the evil one. God has freed us to save others.

It's not enough to just be here at church. It's not enough to put money in the bucket. It's not enough to live according to the law. Our relationship with God requires us to be vigilant in our personal and political and social spheres to make sure that every child of God is treated equally and fairly. We must seek out injustices, seek out the lost, seek out the needy, and never allow even one child of God to be left behind to the forces of greed.

God is not calling us to a life of boredom and unfulfilled lives. He is calling us to answer a revolutionary call of freedom. He is calling you to a great cause. He is calling you to be His representative on earth. Do you realize what an honour that is? Do you realize the scope of His calling?

Let's start by asking this question: "Where do we want to see God's presence and power to break into our world?" "Where is the greatest need that I can fill?" A hero named Mahatma Ghandi looked out over his impoverished nation of India and saw the injustice of oppressive taxation and said "No more!" His movement toppled the greatest Empire of the time.

A simple nun with the assigned name of Mother Theresa looked out into the streets of Calcutta and saw the injustice suffered by the sick and the dying and said, "No More!" Her passion and love brought worldwide awareness of the plight of the poor and the marginalized in society.

A hero named Martin Luther King Jr. looked out at the racial oppression and discrimination that afflicted the black community around him. He said, "No more!" He faced off against the greatest empire of his time, his own country to demand that the unjust and unconstitutional laws of the United States be repealed and rewritten. He succeeded in bringing dignity and freedom to a people who had lost hope.

Where are the heroes of Markham? Where are the heroes of the Olive Branch? If our goal here is to be our community's greatest asset, who's going to fight the good fight for the oppressed and the hungry in York Region. Look around you – 25000 adults and 19000 children are using our food banks every single day.

Once a week, the adult users of the food bank go hungry to ensure that their kids get enough food. When are we going to cry out "No More!" It is only then that we can begin to bring up there down here.