



LIS Preaching Guide

Locked in Solidarity, CCDA's national awareness and action week for mass incarceration begins on a Sunday with intentionality. We are inviting churches and their pastors to begin our week by setting the theological stage/framework for our engagement on this important justice issue. Many thanks to Pastors Bruce Strom, Dominique Gilliard and Leonce B Crump, Jr. respectively for their contributions to this LIS resource.

A Biblical View of Incarceration through the life of Joseph

Key Verse: Heb. 13:3

Supporting Passages – Genesis 18:19; Genesis 39:20-23, 40:23-41:1a; Gen. 50:19

Key Point: God works through unjust circumstances to bring about deliverance and invites us to join Him in rescuing and restoring neighbors in need.

Outline:

1. God's Promise to Abraham. (Gen. 18:19). Abraham was chosen to direct his children and descendants to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is "right and just". Joseph did that, so must we.
2. Joseph's incarceration (Gen. 39:20-23, 40:23-41:1a). Joseph is falsely accused of a crime, forgotten by one he helps, and sits in prison for two years for a crime he did not commit.
 - a. Today in America more than 11 million people sit in jail each year. 99% of the total jail growth in the last 15 years was in the detention of people who are PRESUMED INNOCENT. But because of a lack of funds and access to attorneys they sit in jail for days, weeks or months. 70% are never charged.
 - b. The American prison system cost us more than \$80 billion dollars a year. The United States has 5% of the world's population but 25% of the world's prison population. We've created laws that make writing a bad check or committing a petty theft or minor

property crime an offense that can result in life imprisonment. We have removed discretion from judges in favor of being tough on crime in ways that destroy people and families

- c. As our returning citizens seek to reenter the community they face more than 48,000 legal barriers. Poor women and inevitably their children are banned from receiving food stamps and public housing if they have prior convictions. We create barriers to employment which prevent people from becoming productive members of the community. Our punitive justice model must be changed.

- 3. Joseph's story is a lesson in hope and perseverance. Joseph was given a second chance after prison. As a child of God with gifts and potential, he thrived when allowed to use those gifts. At the end of his life he did not judge – "Am I in the place of God?" – but rather saw God made good out of evil. We must do the same. Jesus invites us to serve Him by serving those in prison. His word instructs us: "Don't forget about those in prison. Suffer with them as though you were there yourself. Share the sorrow of those being mistreated, as though you feel their pain in your own bodies." Heb. 13:3.

- a. Stories of hope – (choose any or all)

Eva walked into a church legal ministry in Philadelphia. She was accused of a serious crime of aggravated assault. Poor and Hispanic she could not effectively argue her innocence.

Like many urban areas across the nation, public defenders are simply overwhelmed. Underfunded and overworked they spend an average of 6 minutes on a case file. Cases become plea bargaining mills. Eva did not want to be separated from her family for a crime she did not commit. A record would follow her for the rest of her life. A Gospel Justice Initiative volunteer lawyer could not allow that injustice. He took Eva's case pro bono. Simply being present and forcing the state to go to trial resulted in the charges being dismissed. The state had no evidence to proceed to trial.

Eva is free. The prayers of volunteer lawyers and a team of compassionate people restored her hope. She sees God in a new way through the demonstration of His servants. Justice is love in action. Today she and her family are actively attending the Spanish speaking church she first walked into for help.

Dr. King wrote from the Birmingham jail, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."

When we come to understand that the injustice faced by Eva impacts us all, we will begin to realize our nation's pledge of liberty and justice for all.

Joe is in his 50's. In 2011, he was sitting in a car with a female friend outside her house when two officers demanded he exit the vehicle. Joe had never been arrested in his life so he sought to cooperate and explain the circumstances. He was a high level security employee at the airport and produced that identification. The officers demanded additional identification. Before he knew what was happening Joe was forcibly pulled from the car, shocked repeatedly

with a 50,000 volt Taser, placed in handcuffs and then struck by one officer with a closed fist. He was arrested for “Failure to comply”.

Joe lived in Ferguson, Missouri. Later the world would learn of the abuses of Ferguson in the misuse of such arbitrary citations as “failure to comply”. Multiple charges like this are used across the country to justify arrest. Joe had no effective representation and was convicted. He learned of a church legal ministry where he met a volunteer Gospel Justice Initiative lawyer. The lawyer filed a civil rights lawsuit against the department and recently the department acknowledged their wrong, settled the case and expunged Joe’s record.

“I was in prison and you came to visit me.” Mt. 25:36c

Frank was a 53-year-old homeless veteran. When Frank was 23 he was arrested for shoplifting. Though Frank was a trained surgical technologist he could not get work because of this 30 year old charge.

Frank found a legal ministry at a church in Indianapolis where he received help to have his record expunged and assistance pursuing work. He also found hope through the prayers and conversations with his lawyer and others at the legal ministry. He learned that God loved him and had a plan for his life. Frank is grateful to God for the “angels of mercy” who intervened in his life to make a difference.

- b. As descendants of Abraham and heirs of the promise of faith we are ALL called to do what is right and just. What is He asking you to do to help incarcerated neighbors?

Prayer: God of mercy and God of justice. You left your throne in heaven to live among us. You identify with us in our suffering and invite us to identify with others who are suffering. You are a wrongly convicted felon sentenced to die on our behalf so we might live life in relationship with you. You invite us to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with you. Empower us this week to seek justice where we may, demonstrate kindness to those who are hurting, and humbly recognize that you love all those created in your image. May we do the same as we love you and love our neighbor. Amen.

Many thanks to the Pastor Bruce Strom of the Gospel Justice Initiative who helped contribute to this part of the preaching guide resource for the CCDA. GJI is a national legal aid ministry committed to engaging Christ followers to serve the legal and spiritual needs of the poor. Bruce Strom is a pastor, lawyer, author of *Gospel Justice* and Founder & CEO of Gospel Justice Initiative. Gospel Justice Initiative is a proud member and partner of Christian Community Development Association.

Scripture commissions the church into prison ministry, and because of this Christians have been engaged in ministry behind bars since the days of the early church. In fact, four books of the Bible were composed in prison. Colossians, Philemon, Ephesians, and Philippians are all “prison epistles,” or

“captivity letters.”¹ Whether all four of Paul’s prison epistles were written within a single prison sentence or over the course of his numerous incarcerations is debated.²

The church has the book of Colossians because a Christian visited Paul during his incarceration. When Paul wrote this letter, he had not visited the church in Colossae.³ Thus, the letter’s inspiration was rooted in a second-hand account by one of the church’s leaders, Epaphras. Paul disciplined Epaphras, who informed Paul about the spiritual state of his church.⁴ The Christians in this region faced many dangers, particularly the potential to backslide into old paganisms. The strongest temptation was syncretism, mixing what they had come to know about Christ with unorthodox teachings they were exposed to both inside and outside of the church.⁵ Thus, Paul’s letter was to serve as a corrective to the unorthodox manifestation of Christianity being exhibited and embraced in Colossae.

Paul, through this letter, provided discipleship to both the leaders and congregants. He taught the community how and why their beliefs and practices were missing the mark.⁶ He then encouraged them to realign themselves with a proper understanding of who God is to them individually and in relation to the world at large. Colossians illuminates the importance of communing with the incarcerated.

Paul’s canonized words testify to the fact that God at times chooses to speak through “criminals.” Their words and teachings can possess timeless wisdom. Paul’s prison epistles turn the tables on how we think about prison ministry. All too often we try to “bring Jesus to prisons,” but Jesus is already there. And in this biblical example we see the good news emanating from behind bars.

The church has failed to see the true impact of our criminal justice system. We have not noticed that mass incarceration is predicated on dehumanization, exploitation, and profiteering. We have not understood the communal effects of drug-war legislation, law-and-order politics, and zero-tolerance policies. We have not realized that most people behind bars are individuals with additions, who have committed nonviolent offenses. They need medical interventions, not incarceration. We have been unable to detect that mass incarceration has evolved into a sinister social strategy to quarantine and exploit the most vulnerable, undesired, and stigmatized populations. We fail to see because many of us have circumvented Scripture’s call to be present in prisons.

All too often, when we encounter the formerly incarcerated, we do not see them as brothers and sisters who reflect God’s image. We usually view them with suspicion and interact cautiously with them. Furthermore, when we do go into prisons and detention centers, we frequently do not believe that people behind bars are capable of returning as citizens who can make our neighborhoods better places. When we think this way, we limit the ways God can work in us and through our ministries.

Dennis Gaddy, founder and executive of Community Success Initiative, a North Carolina-based organization serving the recently released, asks, “Why is it that the same vans that come to the prison

¹ Jerry L. Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary, The New Testament Library* (Louisville: John Knox, 2008), 1.

² David E. Garland, *Colossians, Philemon, NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 20-22.

³ While some believe he might have passed through the city on his third missionary journey, the fact remains that he had no relationship with the congregation.

⁴ Murray J. Harris, *Colossians and Philemon* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010), 4-5.

⁵ Sumney, *Colossians*, 10-11.

⁶ Douglass J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 47.

on Wednesday and Sunday nights to take us to Bible study seem hesitant to pick us up from our homes now that we are released?”⁷ When we doubt the redemptive power of God to transform returning citizens, we are prone to support restrictive legislation that significantly hinders their future lives, particularly their opportunities and access going forward. When we do not believe all people are redeemable, we support tough-on-crime legislation, which handcuffs many individuals who are sincerely trying to turn their lives around. We often do not realize how this legislation affects these individuals, families, and most notably their children.

God’s justice is not soft on crime, but it also not marginalizing, dehumanizing, and retaliatory. Divine discipline must always be understood within the broader context of God’s redemption of all things. Our criminal justice system administers punishment without a plan for restoration. Presently, many individuals serve their time and then cannot successfully reintegrate into communities because they are stripped of their dignity (labeled as ex-cons), deprived of voting rights, and denied the liberties and freedoms that enable them to flourish. Upon completion of their sentence, most continue serving time on the outside, unable to shake the social stigma of incarceration or unable to overcome the barrier posed by a felony record. Many people are never given a second chance in our society.

As people marked by God’s grace, we must lead the charge in advocating for another way. Michelle Alexander writes, “As a society, our decision to heap shame and contempt upon those who struggle and fail in a system designed to keep them locked up and locked out says far more about ourselves than it does about them.”⁸ Some Christians are doing amazing work to topple mass incarceration, but most churches are uninvolved. Christopher Marshall writes that “the first Christians experienced in Christ and lived out in their faith communities an understanding of justice as a power that heals, restores, and reconciles rather than hurts, punishes, and kills, and...this reality ought to shape and direct a Christian contribution to the criminal justice debate today.”⁹

We serve a God whose final word is not retribution but restoration, who desires liberation, reconciliation, and reintegration for those behind bars. God invites the church to participate in setting the captives free, spiritually liberating them and emancipating them from a depraved system that defaces the imago Dei.

Theologically, God’s justice is restorative in nature. Restorative justice acknowledges that divine justice entails people being reconciled to God, each other, the community, and themselves. Rather than rehabilitating, our system quarantines people who have caused harm, which ultimately harms them through punitive measures and dehumanizing conditions. While biblical justice contains punishment for wrongdoing, these punishments are enfolded within a larger narrative of relationship, redemption, and restoration.

Instead of supporting a system that merely punishes, Christians must pursue a justice system that rebuilds community, affirms human dignity, and seeks God’s shalom. The church has the power to help transform our criminal justice system. If reconciled communities are ever to become the true aim of our

⁷ Dennis Gaddy, quoted in Morgan Lee, “How Churches Change the Equation for Life After Prison,” Christianity Today, August 22, 2016, www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2016/september/life-after-prison.html.

⁸ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2012), 176.

⁹ Christopher Marshall, *Beyond Retribution: A New Testament Vision for Justice, Crime, and Punishment* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 33.

justice system, the Church must lead the way in advocating for a system that gives opportunities for authentic rehabilitation, lasting transformation, and healthy reintegration. We are not all called to the same thing, but we are all called to something. Every congregation has a role to play.

Prayer for Prisoners and Correctional Institutions (2007)

“Lord Jesus, for our sake you were condemned as a criminal: Visit our jails and prisons with your pity and judgment. Remember all prisoners, and bring the guilty to repentance and administration of life according to your will, and give them hope for their future. When any are held unjustly, bring them release; forgive us, and teach us to improve our justice. Remember those who work in these institutions; keep them humane and compassionate; and save them from becoming brutal or callous. And since what we do for those in prison, O Lord, we do for you, constrain us to improve their lot. All this we ask for your mercy’s sake.”

Amen. –From The Book of Common Prayer

Additional Resources:

Dominique DuBois Gilliard, *Rethinking Incarceration: Advocating for Justice That Restores*, (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2018). (Much of this reflection was drawn from this source).

Christopher Marshall, *Beyond Retribution: A New Testament Vision for Justice, Crime, and Punishment* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

Christopher Marshall, “Divine Justice as Restorative Justice,” Center for Christian Ethics, 2012, 19, www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/163072.pdf.

Christopher Marshall, *The Little Book of Biblical Justice: A Fresh Approach to the Bible’s Teaching on Justice* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2005).

T. Richard Snyder, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Punishment* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

Many thanks to the Pastor Dominique Gilliard for his contribution for this part of the preaching guide resource. Pastor Gilliard is with the Evangelical Covenant Church Denomination where he serves as the Director of Racial Righteousness and Reconciliation for the Love Mercy Do Justice mission priority of the ECC. He is the author of the newly released book, [Rethinking Incarceration: Advocating for Justice That Restores](#). He is on the board of the CCDA.

Justice

GREETING

PREAMBLE

I’m going to say some things that are going to be less than comfortable, but last time I checked, being uncomfortable was a mark of biblical Christianity. I imagine Christ was not comfortable on the cross, he was not comfortable having the Father turn his back on him for the first time in history but his

discomfort led to everlasting life, did it not? And our discomfort will lead to present life for many, if we put our trust in him.

ANNOUNCE TEXT

SCRIPTURE INTRO

RE-ANNOUNCE TEXT

PRAY

When I was twelve years old, my father had “the talk” with me for the first time. And it wasn’t the birds and the bees talk. It was a different kind of talk, one that you may or may not have had. My father sat down with me and gave me detailed instructions on how to engage the world around me as an African American male, but particularly how to engage law enforcement.

He said, “Always be respectful. Yes, sir; no, sir; yes, ma’am; no, ma’am. Keep your hands visible, don’t make sudden movements. Let them know, no matter what, that you are not a threat of any kind.” It was the talk that we would have again a few years later. I was fifteen when I got my license. And we had that conversation again, and he said, “Listen. If you get pulled over, keep your hands visible, ten and two. Look the officer in the eye and respond with ‘yes, sir; no sir; yes, ma’am; no, ma’am.’ Do what they ask you to do, don’t make any sudden moves, always obey. And no matter what happens, carry yourself with an extra measure of decorum.”

That conversation is one that is very familiar, if you were to ask most of your African American friends, if you have them. It was a conversation I was thankful for, because between the ages of 15 and 35, I was pulled over roughly twice a year, for various reasons, that did not result in a citation of any kind. The first was a few days after that talk with my father, leaving my neighborhood in his Mercedes.

It is often easy for many to pass this off as an isolated incident, but there are no isolated incidents in this world. Stops like these not only create PTSD in the individual, but they do so to those whom he or she represents as well. Stops like these are much of the engine in our broken “justice” system and a culture of mass incarceration. A justice system that justifies such behavior has cause to reevaluate how they imprison and whom.

Fyodor Dostoyevsky once penned, “The degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons.” Our prisons, and the way in which many people entered them as a result of varying levels of systemic injustice, tell a story of our civilization, one that has predetermined the worth of certain groups primarily because of the color of their skin, and secondarily because of the amount of their wealth. How civil are we truly? And furthermore, how can the church ignore such an uncivilized and ungodly reality?

When I was pulled over, pulled out, pushed against the car, and frisked, the treatment was the same. And my fear—the reason I’m sharing that with you—is that one day, fifteen years from now, I will have to have that same conversation with my son. I will have to teach him how to conduct himself for fear that if he conducts himself incorrectly, in any way, that, as my father shared with me, it could cost him his life. My hope today in sharing what I want to share with you is that you would be pricked to the heart in such a way that we would commit ourselves as a community to see this nation shift, to see our national consciousness change in a way that I will never have to have that conversation with my son. That the world would be a very different place for our children than it is for me right now.

Dr. King famously said, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” And we love that quote and we love Dr. King. We love to use that quote to describe the ways that we should defend other nations and defend other peoples and step in to speak up for their abuses. And yet there are brothers and sisters to whom it applies on this very soil. As long as it applies only to those things that we find acceptably unjust, then those words lose their power. And so my hope again is that our perspective would change. Our perspective must change. More specifically, the majority culture, the “evangelical” perspective must change.

Here’s what I mean: Andy Crouch, who is a white brother in Christ, Caucasian, Anglo, one of those PC terms, in his book *Playing God: Redeeming the Gift of Power* wrote this:

“In their important book about race and religion in America, *Divided by Faith*, sociologists Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith observe that what most distinguishes white evangelical Protestants from black Protestants is not their theology or even their desire for racial reconciliation. That needs to be said because very often it’s an impression that some think that African Americans think that their white brothers and sisters don’t want racial reconciliation when many of them who believe in Christ, who believe in the gospel, really do. And so that is not what really divides. What divides mostly is evangelicals’ lack of institutional thinking. When evangelicals think about solving social problems like the legacy of slavery and racism in the United States, they think almost exclusively in terms of personal, one-on-one relationships. Which is why so many white evangelicals can imagine the problem of racism is solved if they simply have a handful of friends of other races. To think of race this way is to miss the fact that race and racism are institutional realities built on a complex set of artifacts, arenas, rules and roles. A few friendships that happen outside of those arenas and temporarily suspend a few of those rules and roles do little to change multigenerational patterns of distorted image-bearing and god-playing based on skin color. Black Christians, however, instinctively know that for the gospel to keep transforming America’s sorry racial history, it will have to keep challenging these deeply ingrained patterns and the structures that even now perpetuate them—while white evangelicals, who identify racism with a handful of dismantled artifacts like twentieth-century Jim Crow laws and legally segregated schools, cannot imagine that racism has a continuing institutional reality.”

That was a mouthful, so let me say it succinctly: for the most part, minorities and our white brothers and sisters see racism very differently. Ethnic minorities, particularly Black and Brown, see the institutional reality of racism in which we exist. Most of our white brothers and sisters see it as an individual sin that must be met with the gospel. The problem with that thinking is that when a bunch of individuals who have a sin in their heart get together, they create a system that is produced from that individual sin. And so yes, racism is a sin of the heart in individuals. But individuals are what make the functions of the societies in which we exist. And when those individuals produce systems and structures based out of the brokenness of their heart, then racism moves beyond praying a prayer at the altar for your heart to change. It also becomes an institutional matter to be resolved, because it exists in the very systems in which we live and function—one such system being mass-incarceration. That is the difference. Though I don’t have a sermon today of typical fashion, I do have some things that, as your pastor, I need you to hear from me. I need you to hear it in a way that allows your heart to receive it.

I need to share with you the things that I believe you need to know that will equip you to process everything that is happening in this era, in light of the eras that preceded them, so that you might think rightly and clearly about them, so that you can respond in a redemptive way. A redemptive posture will allow you to engage injustice—in the criminal justice system and beyond—the way God would have His

people represent Him in the world. A redemptive posture in every respect, as related to injustice, is ensured by our having a biblical view of justice itself, and by not allowing political rhetoric to numb what we see is good and right. I have a few statements we need to hear and process as a community, and I encourage you to write them down.

1. **Justice is a biblical issue not a political one.** Justice is a biblical issue, not a political one. This is not about right or left, this is not about being absorbed in Western, individualistic, political rhetoric that has possessed the evangelical church for so long. Justice is not a political issue, it is a biblical one. And the reason that you need to hear that is because it is often couched as a political issue by those who would otherwise avoid the conversation. If you want to keep your soul clean, please don't follow me on social media. Because some of the responses that I receive will make you lose faith in humanity. For example, "I'm really hurting about this: It seems very clear from the data and all other things that this is a systemic problem in society but more than that it is something that I face personally." The response: "Keep your leftist rhetoric out of Jesus' mouth." Another response: "All you do is go on and on about race. When are you going to stop talking about that?" And my flesh wants to respond, "Believe me, I'm tired of talking about it, so please get saved already!" But the Spirit of God in me makes me want to press in, give data and statistics about why black-on-black crime is an invented reality, why racial disparities in sentencing and incarceration are actual realities, how there has been a 500% increase in the jail population of African Americans and Hispanics, who make up 56% of prisons. The most unfortunate reality is that most of these comments come from other professing Christians. On a Side note, *Slavery By any Other Name* gives some pretty painful history about how we arrived at this place. Justice is not leftist rhetoric. Justice is not a political persuasion. Justice is a biblical ideal that flows from the very heart of God.

Psalm 33:4-5 says, "For the word of the Lord is upright, and all his work is done in faithfulness. He loves righteousness and justice. The earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord." Micah 6:8 says, "He has told you, oh man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God." Matthew 23:23, we'll take it New Testament, to the words of Jesus, as he turns to the Pharisees, the religious elite, the people who went to church all the time and said "Woe to you Pharisees, for you tithe of dill and mint and cumin, but you neglect the weightier matters of justice and mercy."

If we as believers allow the idea of justice to be consumed in political rhetoric and posturing, then we diminish the desire for justice that is flowing from the very heart of God. Justice is not political, it's biblical. It is mentioned over 200 times in the Old Testament. And its most basic meaning is to treat people equitably. And you say to yourself, "Well yeah, I do that most of the time." Ah, but you see, that's just the first part. It is not only to treat people equitably, but it is to ensure equitability. That is the definition of justice for God's people, to treat people equitably and to ensure equitability.

And so what we find over and over again in scripture is that God is shown to love and defend those with the least social and economic power, and therefore so should we, church. In fact, that is what it means in Micah 6:8, "to do justice." And our making it an individualistic issue is the greatest threat to that very thing. And any neglect to that ideal, any lack of love and defense of those most vulnerable and most prone to the abuses of society, is a violation of justice. We should come to their aid.

And so out of that ideal, let me say this as plainly as I can say it, because this is a common accusation: to desire equitability in how African Americans are policed and treated in this culture and in this society is

not akin to hating white people or hating police. Don't let it become that. And it is not meant to engender white guilt either. Don't feel guilty for being white. Nobody wants you to feel guilty. Don't let people put those false ideas in your mind. When someone says, "See me. Recognize me. Notice me. I want to be treated equitably." It is not saying, "Be ashamed of being white. You should be sorry for being white." Don't even worry about being white. In fact, grow a John B. beard." Nobody is saying that. Be who you are and leverage the privilege that comes with that. Leverage it to do what, you ask? To ensure equitability. That's the ask. That is why you have been given your privilege in the first place. It doesn't mean we hate police. Many of us have family members who are police and military. We love them! What is shameful is when justice becomes a part of political rhetoric, great, diligent, honest officers get overshadowed by the few that dishonor the role. And then we get caught up choosing sides, when there is no side here. Justice is the only side, if we are God's people.

2. Justice is corporate, not individualistic.

Isaiah 1:17 says, "Learn to do good..." This is said to his people. So, if you're a Christian, you're his people. "Learn to do good, seek justice, correct oppression, bring justice to the fatherless as a gift to be bestowed. Plead the cause of the widow." Now, routinely throughout the Old Testament, there's kind of a three-to-four-fold cacophony to which this idea of justice is directed. It is to those orphans who have no parents, those women who have no husbands, those poor who cannot provide for themselves, and those who are disadvantaged, displaced, or abused by a government or society. And God's call to his people in the face of those realities is clear in this text. First, learn to do good. Whatever "good" is, in that context, learn to do it. But not only that. Seek justice. That means that we can't passively look at things and say, "Man, that is really terrible." No, we step back and we say, "How can we seek justice here as God's people? How can we see this wrong righted." Again, think of the definition. How can we ensure equitability such that this would never happen again?

Not only that, it says that God's people are called to correct oppression. That means that wherever we see oppression, in all of the various forms, that we should be on the front line to see it corrected. Now we do that for some things. We say, "Man, they're trafficking women in Southeast Asia. I'm going to go work for IJM." They're doing it right here in the city of Atlanta. "We're going to become champions for Street Grace and Wellspring." Well, when thirteen percent of the population is almost forty percent of deadly force cases. And really, let me back up, six percent of the population—African American men are about six percent of the population—account for almost forty percent of deadly force cases; when that same group, and our Hispanic brothers and sisters account for more than half the prison system, something's wrong. And what is wrong is not disproportionate criminal behavior, but the policing of those people groups, and the sentencing disparities that follow. We have a problem. And that means that whatever that problem is and whatever the solution is, God's people should be on the front lines to correct oppression and bring justice. Because, this is not an individualistic idea, it's a corporate idea.

But you know why we have so much trouble with that? You know why? Because we have reduced sin to an individual and personal issue alone. And it's how we've preached it for years. "God will forgive YOU of YOUR sin. Just pray this prayer." And we've perpetuated it, perpetuated the root of Western individualism that is choking out biblical Christianity. So my sin is my sin, and your sin is your sin. That's why we can't live in community honestly. And while there are many derivatives here, let's focus on the one at hand. When we reduce sin to individualistic categories and terms, then we have no eyes to see how sin becomes systemic and affects everybody that it touches, oppressed and oppressor.

Dr. Soong-Chan Rah, in his book, *The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Captivity*—you need to read that—says, “Our reduction of sin to a personal issue means that we are unwilling to deal with social, structural evils, and this reduction prevents us from understanding the full expression of human sinfulness and fallen-ness.” What does Paul write in Romans 8? What is groaning in Romans 8? Each individual person simultaneously but singularly? Is that what the Bible says? Or does it say that the earth itself groans? Sin is like a pervasive cancer. And the cells multiply rapidly. And unless we are radiating it with the power of the gospel, it will continue to reproduce, not only sinful people but sinful people who produce sinful systems that we end up submitting ourselves to. Justice is a corporate issue, not just an individualistic one.

3. We have to learn to lament.

The church in general has to learn to lament again. Do you know how many psalms of lament are written? There’s a whole book called Lamentations, or “It’s real bad, bruh.” That’s my translation. “It’s real bad out here, God. Don’t you see it?” We have to learn to lament again. And because we live in a very shallow culture, it is very easy for our national consciousness to just move on when minorities are systemically oppressed. Now I’m not saying that you need to go into a hole, wallow, and not function. I don’t know what it looks like for you necessarily. What I do know is that when I was on my way to the barber shop yesterday, I had a strange set of emotions. I was driving down Centennial and I was in the little area where the Ferris Wheel and the park and all of that is and there were hoards and hoards and hoards of people out there. And everybody was just doing their thing: eating ice cream, chasing kids, skipping, riding on the Ferris Wheel, going to restaurants, laughing and giggling. And I’m not saying any of that is wrong. None of that is wrong. But at the same time, I kept juxtaposing that with the reality of the families in Louisiana and for the families in Dallas and for the families in Minnesota, who are mourning the loss of people that they love. And not only that but what those losses speak about the fabric of our society. And so, as I sat those scenes next to each other, I was deeply grieved and broken inside. Even as I was on my way to get my hair cut, all I could think was, “Man, I should be in sack cloth and ashes right now.”

I juxtaposed it to the great gift my family is to me and the loss of family so many others experience when facing the justice system. My friend Robert lost 25 years with his father, who was later exonerated. What did they receive in response to this loss? An apology. We cannot point to fatherlessness in the African American community as the issue (which CDC statistics refute), when our justice system is what is taking fathers from homes through unfair sentencing and police brutality.

We have become so desensitized that we can watch a man die on camera, pressed against a vehicle, and another man die on camera strapped into his car, and another officer bleed out in the street, and the news will loop it over and over and over and repeat what little details they have over and over and over again because they have nothing to say. And the church fights about the justifiability of it. The church fights about whether you’re on the side of the police or the side of African Americans. And I imagine the Father weeps, as his people more readily reflect the broken world they’re in rather than the one they say they belong to.

We have to learn to lament again, to slow down for a moment and just hurt. To ask God, “Why?” Do you think God is afraid or offended by your questions? If the Bible says he numbered the hairs on your head, surely he knows what’s happening in you brain and your soul inside your body.

That's why I love Habakkuk. Habakkuk 1: "Oh Lord how long shall I cry for help?" That's how I feel right now. I'll go ahead and tell you. This is what lamenting feels like: "How long shall I cry for help and you will not hear. Or cry to you violence, violence, this is it, and you will not say, why do you make me see iniquity, why do you idly look at wrong? Destruction and violence are before me. Strife and contention arise. The law is paralyzed. And justice never goes forth for the wicked surround the righteous and so justice is perverted." Does that not feel like this world? We've got to learn to slow down and step back and just hurt about what is happening before we just move on with our life.

4. We must see all as image bearers.

You are an image bearer of the living God and I cannot violate you because you bear his image. And I cannot be desensitized to your violation because you bear his image. We have to see all as image bearers.

Now, if this hasn't been uncomfortable enough, let me just go ahead and tell you, it's about to get more uncomfortable. Because I got to say some truths to you that you're not going to want to hear. But in our culture, in our broader, western culture, black and brown is not beautiful. It isn't. There is a European, normative standard of beauty that hangs like a sheet over everything. And we all submit ourselves to it. And we do it blindly. And we do it, some of us, even willingly.

A couple of years ago, there was a study called "the Doll Study." This originally happened in 1940s with Kenneth and Mamie Clark, and was redone by Anderson Cooper in 2010.

The gist is that researchers got a bunch of children from different ethnicities and they got a bunch of dolls of different ethnicities. And every single child picked the white doll as the prettiest one. Why do you think that is? Those things can't just go past us without asking why. Why do you think that happened?

More specific to the situation that we're presently talking about, because there are a series of lies that we have believed for many, many years. We believe that black life is cheap. And I'm not just talking about my white brothers and sisters. Let me tell you something hard, brown folks: we believe black life is cheaper. If you can pop a CD or an MP3 on that casually touts black people murdering black people and bob your head to it, it's because you think black life is cheap. If you can sit and listen to a man call black women "hoes" repeatedly every single day because the beat is hard, black life is cheap to you. You are not declaring those women to be image bearers. You're calling them less than that.

Further, for whatever reason in our country, for many, many reasons actually, blackness is equated with criminality and deviance. And it has been for a long, long time. You don't believe me. Go and look up the data. In the most recent study from the University of Illinois, both police and citizens of all races, including black citizens, were given a test. The participants were all more likely to shoot a black man armed or unarmed than they were any other race. More likely to do so and more quickly to do so. It's just raw data. Raw data. And again, not anti-police, this was police and citizens. More likely and more quickly to shoot a black man than any other race, whether he was armed or unarmed. Because we have been socialized into believing that to be black is to be criminal.

So I knew as soon as the video came out of the officers kneeling on Alton Sterling, shooting him at close range, the next thing that would come out, because it's so predictable, would be his rap sheet. Well guess what, Moses had a rap sheet. He's a murderer. And David had a rap sheet. David's rap sheet was

so long that the Lord said, "Bruh, you can't even build my temple. It's gotta be your son because you have so much blood on your hands." Paul had a rap sheet. But those things are used because if I can dehumanize you, then I can justify the injustice. And that is not seeing people as image bearers. His rap sheet makes him no less created in the image of God, which means that we cannot justify or celebrate the violation of an image bearer.

In Genesis 1:26-27, God said "I have made them in my image. Male and female, I have made them in my image." And then the first violation of that, where do we see it? We see it in Genesis 4, when Cain kills his brother. And here's what's devastating about that story for me, more than any other thing in that story: when God comes to him and says, "Hey, where is your brother?" Cain callously replies, "Am I my brother's keeper?" And family, that is what we are guilty of. When we diminish the image of God in other people, we are saying, "Am I my brother's keeper?" And whenever we do that, whenever we look at events like this and callously respond that way, we wear the sin of Cain. You see, empathy, for the Christian, is not an option. It's not an option. And the desire to be seen as image bearer is not wrong.

Here, let me correct one fallacy. The idea behind Black Lives Matter is not that black lives matter more, it's that black lives matter too. And the fact that we even have to say that, is evidence of the problem. Why is there an organization called Black Lives Matter? Maybe, for a second, as Christians we can empathize and say, "Because they don't feel as if they do. And I need figure out why." Rather than saying, "Look at all the advancements since the days of slavery." The fact that people of color have to say that, hear me, this is my heart to your heart, the fact that a person of color has to say, "I matter too," is evidence of the problem. And empathy, just plain empathy, is not an option for the Christian.

So I will go further, as Dr. King said, "We must learn to live together as brothers or we will perish together as fools." He was always prophetic in that way.

5. God's people must care and act.

That's kind of where it all terminates. God's people must care and act.

Amos 5:21-24 says, "I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept them. And the peace offerings of your fattened animals, I will not look upon them. Take away from me the noise of your songs. To the melody of your hearts I will not listen." Now what do you think comes after that? It's one of the most famously quoted verses in the world: "But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

You see here's the bottom line: God couldn't care less how many songs we sing, and how wonderful they sound, and how many quiet times we have and how eloquent our prayers, and how many books we write and how many Christians manage to read them. As we uphold the Christian industrial complex that is so insulated that outsiders look in and can't even see our Christ because they're blinded by our hypocrisy. He doesn't care. If we are not doing justice, He doesn't care.

You want to tie it together, that's called systematic theology. You want to tie it together, seek justice, correct oppression and if you don't, I don't care about your songs, and I don't care about your gatherings, and I don't care about your books, and I don't care about your insulated bubble in which you exist that is not changing anything around you. I don't care, if you're not going to do justice. If you're not going to be righteous. If you're not going to correct oppression. If you're not going to incline your heart

and turn your eyes toward the vulnerable and disadvantaged. I don't care. That's what he said to his people then. And because we believe the Bible is timeless, that's what he's saying to his people now. Now here's the good news in all of this, the good news is this, that I woke up this morning and Jesus is still on the throne. And that the gospel that we say we believe not only binds broken hearts but it can mend broken communities. And it can move us to give our lives for justice and the equality of all people.

6. The gospel binds broken hearts and communities.

The implications of Christ's beautiful reconciling work are endless. Not only does the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection heal my broken heart and cure me of my sin-sickness, and right me with the Father, but it has societal implications that says we're God's people motivated by the gospel to do justice and seek mercy and stand for righteousness and display the kingdom, and we'll shift the cultural narrative. We don't have to remain under the strain of systemic sinfulness and societal brokenness. And we have the power of the Holy Spirit in us that raised Christ from the dead. We have that.

That means that if we really believe this, that we're not going to allow that to be couched in individualistic terms, tied to a prayer I prayed to get myself to heaven. But that we're going to see all of its broad, sweeping, wondrous implications. Not the least of which, is to see justice couched in biblical language rather than co-opted by political rhetoric. To see justice be a corporate reality for God's people rather than an individualistic thing that has been co-opted by western individualism. That same gospel would allow us time to lament and heal and wake us from that stupor so that we can see something different. That same gospel will empower us to see with new lenses the Imago Dei stamped on the best of us and the worst of us. That gospel will keep us from being rendered paralyzed in putting on worthless gatherings while injustice happens and justice is perverted all around us.

It is that hope that I have. My hope is that you're not going to leave here mad because you heard something you didn't want to hear, but that you would leave here thoughtful and hopeful that things are going to be different because our community, our church has determined to engage injustice and our broken justice system in a redemptive way. That's the hope I have: that in fifteen years, because God's people decided that they were going to do justice, that I won't have to have that conversation with my son, that we won't have to have these conversations about race, that the cultural consciousness will have shifted in a way that we actually believe Dr. King's words that we are all God's children and we live that way.

CLOSING PRAYER

BENEDICTION

Many thanks to Pastor Léonce B. Crump Jr for his contribution for this part of the preaching guide resource. Léonce B. Crump Jr. is an activist, social commentator, international speaker and the founding and Lead Pastor of Renovation Church in Atlanta, Georgia. He is also the author of [Renovate: Changing Who You Are by Loving Where You Are.](#)