



BelPres Church

Michael

Speaker: Scott Dudley

Disclaimer: This transcript was computer generated and may contain errors.

So good to see all of you here, those of you who are watching online, those of you here in the room who made it here in spite of 405 being closed and all those good things, thank you for being here on Sunday. One of the most transformational 15 minutes of my life happened in my last year in seminary. And if you don't know what that is, seminary is a school that allegedly teaches you how to be a pastor. And during my last year, I worked as a substitute teacher in Trenton High School to make some money. And I knew a lot about that school because my first wife taught math there. And at the time, it was one of the worst schools in the country. A lot of violence, a lot of gang activity, drug dealing, really low test scores, and a lot of dysfunction. Students would wait for their class schedule sometimes up to a month after school had started, just waiting all day in the cafeteria with nothing to do for a month. And even then, when they got it, they'd be put in classes that made no sense at all, put into geometry when they couldn't do even basic math, setting them up to fail. And there were some really great teachers in that school, but there were also some really bad ones. And the bad ones were never reprimanded, certainly never fired. And almost all the students were black. And there was some outright racism as well as the patronizing bigotry of low expectations. My first wife was told to give every student a passing grade whether they knew the material or not. And the reason the principal gave was, quote, they're black and their poor just passed them. And sadly, that principal was black herself, because there is such a thing as internalized racism. On top of that, decades of redlining, which kept lower income people of color out of wealthier white neighborhoods, meant that the neighborhood around that school was all low income people. And as a result, that school didn't have as much money as other schools. And all of that made both my first wife and me really mad. She was the

daughter of a Mexican immigrant, and education was the way they got out of poverty. And my dad grew up extremely poor, homeless at times. Times they didn't have anything to eat. My grandmother figured out a way to get all six of her kids to college and got us out of that through education. So education really mattered to us. So when my first wife would tell me stories about that school, I would get so angry, I would put a pillow over my mouth and scream words that seminary students are not supposed to say. In fact, if the neighbors overheard it, I'm sure they're like, isn't he studying to be a pastor? I knew all of that, but it became personal when I started substitute teaching there. And my first morning before the students arrived, one of the white teachers said to me, a white substitute teacher at Trenton High School, you're in for the. The worst day of your life. Thank you. And then he said, and this is really hard to hear, but it's what he said, the only thing these kids are good for is making babies. And if we could figure out a way to sell black babies, we'd be rich. Only he didn't say black. He said a word I'd only heard on movies, but never actually from a person. A word that if I had used growing up, my parents would have opened up a good old fashioned can of Eastern Washington. Whoop, you know what? And I might not be here to tell the tale. And I was stunned. I'd never heard that word used before. And this was not 1950s Alabama. This was 1990 New Jersey. Later that day, after one of my classes ended and all the students left, there was one student who stayed behind, and his name was Michael. And I remember him because Michael changed my life in 15 minutes. He said, can I stay here and study? And I said, oh, they told me, I'm not allowed to let you do that. I don't know why. That's just the rule. And I said, why do you want to study here? And he said, well, I want to be a doctor, which means I need good grades so that I can go to college. But if I try to study here at school, the other kids will make fun of me. They'll steal my books. I won't get anything done. And I can't study at home because my mom has addiction problems and my brother sells drugs. So our house is just chaos. So, please, can I stay? I want to be a doctor. And my first thought was how? I mean, yes, people do it. But he had so many obstacles in front of him. And as I said, my dad grew up really poor. And we got so deep. In my DNA is the American dream that if you work hard, that you can rise above your station. And my family lived that American dream. And I still believe a lot of it. It's one of the great things about our country. But Michael had way more obstacles in front of him than anyone I knew. When I told my dad that story, he said, whoa, he has it harder than I did. And my dad had it really hard. But my dad had three things Michael didn't have. He had a mother that didn't struggle with addiction issues. And he was in a small town where everybody knows everybody. And yeah, a lot of folks in that town that had downsides. A lot of folks in that town would be like, oh, those Dudleys, wrong side of the tracks. But there were a few good people who helped my grandmother. And then third, my dad wasn't black. And as hard as it was for my dad, and it was hard, how much

harder had he been black? And when Michael said, I want to be a doctor, the Holy Spirit just broke my heart for his situation. And I got tears in my eyes. I did the only thing I could think of to help him. I let him stay and study. I broke the rules. That story crosses a lot of our political narratives. Where on one side, conservative folks will look at Michael's situation, They'll tend to say the cause is a lack of personal responsibility and bad choices. And you see some of that in his story, right? Like his dad was nowhere in the picture. Failing to do his job as a father, his mother's addiction issues, his brother selling drugs, those were bad choices that made their situation worse. Now, that said, there were also some really great parents in that neighborhood, and their kids were still stuck in that school. And as for bad decisions, oh, I made some whoppers when I was in high school. Really bad decisions that could have ended me up in something similar to Michael's situation. I just had more of a relational and financial safety net than Michael's family did. And as for addiction issues, well, plenty of addiction problems in Medina and Clyde Hill and Beverly Hills. There's just money to cover it over. But yes, the people around Michael made some really bad decisions. Absolutely. Then on the other side, liberal people tend to say, well, the problem is systemic injustice. You also see that in Michael's story. His school was riddled with unjust practices and policies. And even though redlining wasn't happening anymore, the long term effects meant that neighborhood was mostly poor and the school had less money. That story crosses all of our political narratives because these issues are really complicated and they can't be boiled down to our simplistic political jargon. And I think about Michael still, you know, he was younger than me, so he's probably still alive. I don't know if he ever became a doctor. I hope so. The Holy Spirit used Michael's story to break my heart because it breaks God's heart. And I know Bell Press that it also breaks your heart. Like we're going to have. We're going to kind of have different ideas about what causes that Situation and how to fix that situation. But I know Michael's situation breaks your heart. So the title I give this sermon is Michael. Because ultimately, this isn't a political issue to argue about. When we really experience the Holy Spirit and encounter people caught in injustice face to face, not as categories that we have opinions about, not as political footballs that we kick around, but as people, the Holy Spirit breaks our hearts for what breaks God's heart. And there's lots of kinds of injustice in the world. Michael's is only one kind. Child trafficking is a horrendous injustice. Scams that trick the elderly out of their life savings. People around the world being held in slavery, There's a lot of it. We're doing a sermon series about what happens when people and churches give the Holy Spirit free reign in their lives. And when lots of people do that, it's called revival. And throughout history, some of those revivals have lasted for years and become transformational revivals that change things for the better. And one of the features of all those transformational revivals is. Is seeking mercy and justice. The second Great Awakening, for

instance, not only led to the abolition of slavery, but also laws to protect children, prison reform programs to help people who are in poverty, things like that. The Holy Spirit leads us to acts of mercy and justice. And mercy is when we give people like Michael aid and help and justice. Not in the sense of, you know, punishment for crimes, but biblical justice means fixing the root causes of the circumstances that Michael was in, why he was in those circumstances. And biblically speaking, the motive for mercy and justice is not guilt. Our culture does a lot of guilt, especially around issues like this is no way to do it. I have a friend who has a bachelor's degree in communications and a master's in psychology. And whenever he's asked what he can do with that combination, he says, oh, I can look at the flow of communication back and forth within an organization structure and. And identify all the ways it's your parents fault, guilt, terrible motivator. The motive for mercy and justice is also not to make ourselves feel good because, oh, we're being, quote, compassionate or to virtue signal to get other people to look at us and go, oh, you're so compassionate. Oh, yeah, I am. I'm down for all the right causes, man. Oh, ick. To quote Pastor Tim Keller, the biblical motive for justice is not duty, it's beauty. The motive is the beauty of a world set right. No poverty, no child trafficking, no racism, no senior citizens being scammed and everybody thriving. So if you have a Bible, turn to Isaiah, chapter 58, and you can please feel free to use the table of contents to find it. It's kind of in the middle of the Bible, but that's actually not going to help you very much. So just use the table of contents. And Isaiah 58 points to the beauty of a world set, right? And it points to the need for our hearts to be transformed so that we can participate with the Holy Spirit in setting right the world. And in Isaiah 58, God is speaking through the prophet Isaiah, and he says, shout it aloud. Do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet, right? God says, shout it doesn't say whisper, it says shout it. Because there's an urgency and there's an importance to the message that's coming. Declare to my people their rebellion and to the descendants of Jacob their sin. For day after day they seek me out. They seem eager to know my ways, right? Like they really. They want to know God. Verse 3, why have we fasted, they say, and you have not seen it. Why have we humbled ourselves and you have not noticed it? So, like, they're like, we're doing everything right. We're going to church, we're praying, we're fasting, we're doing all the religious stuff, but we're not experiencing your presence, God. Why is that? We. What God is about to tell them. Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife and in striking each other with wicked fists. Okay, that's a bad day at church, man, when you start hitting each other in church. Must have been a terrible sermon. Hope it doesn't turn out that way today. You can't fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high, right? God's saying, fasting is a good thing. Going to church is a good thing. But they were just going through the religious ritual motions which

are meaningless unless they transform our hearts to become people who seek mercy and justice. If our worship doesn't change our hearts, it's probably because we're just going through the religious motions, not actually connecting with Jesus. Verse 6. Is not this the kind of fasting that I have chosen? To loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter? That word there in the Hebrew means immigrant or refugee with shelter. And if we do these things. If we seek mercy and justice in these ways, well then what happens? Verse 8. Then your light will break forth like the dawn and your healing will quickly appear. Verse 9. Then you will call and the Lord will answer and you will cry for help. And he will say, here I am. In other words, when we join God's work of mercy and justice, we experience his presence and his power. Our light breaks forth like the dawn. And then skip over to verse 12. Then your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age old foundations. You will be called repairer of broken walls, restorer of the streets with dwelling. And there's the motive for justice. The beauty of a world set right, streets of dwelling restored. When we join God's mission to bring mercy and justice to people who need it, we experience his presence, we experience his power, and we heal our country. Because here's the thing, Holy Spirit, justice is about restoration, not retribution or revenge. See, we're talking about a certain kind of justice here. Sometimes what gets called justice in our world actually isn't justice. Holy Spirit justice is about restoration, not retribution or revenge. It's restoration of what got broken, of what got hurt, what got wounded, what died. It needs to be brought back to life. And Holy Spirit, justice has at least three components. And first, the first component is it's a high priority from God. Isaiah says, shout it, blow the trumpets. This is important. Don't whisper it. There are over 2000 verses in the Bible about healing injustice. More verses in the Bible about that than about faith or prayer or sex or money or almost anything else. This is such a high priority for God that when he came himself in the person of Jesus, he was born into poverty in a colonized country oppressed by the Roman Empire and died, was killed for crimes that he did not commit. In Jesus, God himself becomes a victim of different kinds of injustice. That's how high a priority it is for God. And you can find a lot of religions in history where various gods have identified with the rich and the powerful. But there is only one God who identified with victims of injustice and, and that's Jesus. Which means that Karl Marx, the founder of communism, was so wrong when he said Christianity was invented by powerful people to keep people oppressed. Sorry Carl, that doesn't wash. God identifies with the poor and the and the marginalized. Second, Holy Spirit justice empowers, not disempowers. So for instance, in the Bible, God commanded the landowners not maximize their profits by harvesting everything, but leave the crops on the edges of the field so that Those who were poor could glean. It was

called gleaning. Could pick those crops that were left over and earn a living through their own labor. It was called gleaning. The poor could glean what the landowners didn't harvest. It wasn't charity, it wasn't a handout. Charity may be necessary in the short term, but. But in the long run it's disempowering and it creates cycles of dependency. That is not Holy Spirit justice. It is also not compassionate. Work dignifies. Work gives meaning and purpose. God's command created a structure where even people who didn't own land could have the dignity of earning their own living through their own labor. Holy Spirit justice acknowledges that we don't all start at the same starting line. Michael and I had very different starting lines. And Holy Spirit justice corrects that. So everyone has an opportunity to thrive. If Michael made it to college, he probably would have needed some extra help to compensate for the things he wasn't getting in that high school. That's why as a church we started Jubilee Reach and support Eastside Academy because they help kids from under resourced families get what they need to move ahead in life and thrive. It's not a handout, it's a hand up. It's empowering and it brings dignity. Third characteristic of Holy Spirit justice is special concern for the powerless and the marginalized. God never says speak up for the rich and the powerful. Not because he doesn't love rich people, he does. But the rich and powerful have the resources to make their own voices heard and the poor don't. So think of it this way. I love all three of my kids the same. But if one of them is sick, I have a special concern for the sick. And I child. It's not that I love that child more, it's that I have a special concern for that child because he's in a he or she is in a particular spot that the others aren't highly important. Empowering, special concern for the poor and the oppressed. And God says when we seek his mercy and justice, his kind of mercy and justice, we experience the power and the presence of God more. And it is deeply rewarding because we get to be part of setting the world right. The beauty of a world set right to be part of that is so rewarding. So action steps for this week. First, pray this prayer. Holy Spirit, break my heart for what breaks yours, mercy and justice. Don't start with politics. In fact, sometimes politics is where justice goes to die. It starts with a broken heart. The Holy Spirit broke my heart for Michael and changed my life in 15 minutes. Michael, as well as my own family's healing history with poverty, is a big part of the reason why I'm so passionate about some of the ministries of our church, like Jubilee Reach and Eastside Academy, that are helping people like Michael. And I've seen the beauty of a world being set right through the power of Jesus. In those ministries, hundreds of kids who were caught in some really hard circumstances are now thriving in jobs that they love. And families they're raising faith had slaughtered them for a very difficult life. But those ministries stepped in, brought justice, gave what they didn't have in order that they can go on and thrive. Ask the Holy Spirit to break your heart for what breaks his. Human trafficking, predatory loan practices, racial injustice. We've come a long

way in our country on that last one. We've made some great strides. But still, our black, brown, Asian, and immigrant brothers and sisters in Christ are having experiences the rest of us aren't having. And part of having our hearts broken is to listen to their experiences or to learn from them. And you can learn about them. You can go to our website and go to bellpressjustice.org and there's resources and materials to help us listen to people of color and the experiences that they're having. One of the greatest gifts the Holy Spirit can give us is a broken heart. And it is a gift because there's more room in a broken heart, more room for God's people, more room for what God is doing in the world. And then second action step, ask the Holy Spirit to show you what you can do in your sphere of influence. Maybe you own a business and you're in a position to create jobs for people like Michael or volunteer at Jubilee Reach or Eastside Academy. Ask the Holy Spirit to show you opportunities you have to bring his mercy and his justice where you live or work or. Or go to school or where you play. In that story I told you about Trenton High School, there weren't a lot of heroes in that situation, but there was at least one. My first wife and our marriage didn't work out because we were both sinful people. And I've told you that story in other sermons, but she was the best teacher I've ever known. And my mom, dad, and sister are all teachers, so I know what I'm talking about. She would stay three or four hours after school ended to help any student that wanted it. She invented ways to make math more interesting, even to me. And I hate math. Like Hell is doing those math story problems, right? If a train leaves the station going, oh, who cares? Take the plane, right? When a student would fail a test in order to combat that sense of helplessness and hopelessness, she'd sit down with them and say, I want you to say this sentence, I chose to fail that test. And they'd always go, I didn't choose. You gave me the F. I didn't choose it. And she'd say, listen, you had all the help that you needed to pass that test available to you, but you didn't take advantage of it. So if I have to sit here all day and all night, you're not leaving this room until you say, I chose to fail that test. And finally they'd say it. And then she would lean forward and she would say, and just like you chose that, you can choose to pass the next one, and I'll do whatever it takes to get you there. And she did that to give them a sense of agency in their lives. And as a result, some of the kids started doing well in math. They also learned study skills that helped them out in other classes. They gained a sense of accomplishment and self worth, and she'd point them to scholarships if they were interested in college. She gave them hope. She couldn't change all the harshness of that environment, but she could change her classroom and bring just a little bit of justice there. And that was her sphere of influence. And yes, it cost her time and energy. Some of the administrators gave her heat for it. They said she was being too hard on the students. But she always had energy and joy in that job, as hard as it was, because she knew she was part of fixing the problem. And that just feels good.

And for me, it got me out of my nice, tidy little seminary God that I had reduced down to Greek and Hebrew and theology and opened my eyes to injustice in the world and gave me a passion to heal it. I learned way more about God's heart for the world at Trenton High School than I ever learned in seminary. And when we seek mercy and justice, to quote Isaiah, our light breaks forth like the dawn, and we become repairers of the breach, restorers of the streets with dwelling as the Holy Spirit works through us to make right what is wrong and heal our land. In a minute, we're going to sing a song that we sometimes sing here in modern worship. And I think the words make a great prayer for us today. And I'll say them now. And then when we sing them, you can sing them as a prayer. Lord, heal my heart and make it clean. Open up my eyes to the things unseen. Show me how to love the way you have loved me. Break my heart for what breaks yours. Everything I am for your kingdom's cause as I walk from here into eternity. Jesus, you are the justice bringer. You define what mercy and justice look like. So Lord, help us this week to see the opportunities we have where we live, work, play, or learn to set right something that is wrong, to bring justice where there is injustice and show mercy where there needs to be mercy. Holy Spirit, give us all of your creativity on how to do that. Give us the eyes to see it and give us your power to do it so that the world will know that there is a God who oversees this entire universe and he is a God of justice and his name is Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Scripture Reflection Questions: Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What are the people's complaints with God? In your own words, what does God say to them in response to their complaint? What does he say is the root of their problem?
- What does this passage tell us about what true worship is about? What specific actions does God look for? Why do those matter?
- What does this passage reveal about God's heart?
- In your own words, what are the blessings God promises people who worship/fast the way he commands in this passage?

Sermon Reflection Questions: Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- Scott shared how his experience with Michael was "15 minutes that changed my life." What is a way that the God has used the Holy Spirit to break your heart and then shown you what to do? How did you respond?

- Where do you see injustice right now in your current sphere of influence (where you live, work, play, or learn)? How might you be prompted to partner with the Holy Spirit to innovate for biblical mercy and justice?

Closing Question and Application: Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

Closing group prayer: Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Take the challenging parts of your conversation to Jesus. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.