

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God of all creation, it is time to come and be. Our hearts and paths call us to be in your house where peace may be found: among the presence of fellow people committed to your cause. Help us today, gracious God, to declare a Gospel of life, a Gospel of joy, a Gospel that honors one another as more important than ourselves. Through this, we seek to glorify you and to live a life of fullness, a life of significance, an abundant life, God of plentiful living. Hear the cries of our hearts, those things we long for, shouts of gratefulness, and those things we are concerned about: for ourselves, our neighbors, our world. Hear us and guide us how we should live and be each day to glorify your name.

Holy God, we hear in the news dreadful things that tear your children apart. The world seems dark; we find it hard to just be OK in so much turmoil. And yet, because we are your people, we are not called to hide from the trouble but to be your witness in the midst of it. And this world certainly calls for your witness when your people are hurt. Help us to be people of your justice that seeks repentance among those who have done wrong and people of loving humility and compassion to victims of such misdeeds. Help us not to hide from the controversies but to be that loving presence bringing forth the truth of your just character, Holy God. We pray all these things in Christ's name, the name that announces justice and compassion, as we pray the prayer that he taught us, saying...

SERMON

I'm sure if you've been paying attention the last two years, you all know that I love football, especially NFL Football. I like to wind down my Sundays by going home, turning on football, and relaxing for the rest of the day while occasionally yelling at the TV. And, this afternoon, I will be doing exactly that when I see the Bears take down those annoying

Green Bay Packers. Many have the same routine: sit back and forget the world for a while. In this other world, what matters is the next first down, the next stop, the next touchdown.

That carefree world has fallen apart in the last few months. The lines between relaxed sports fandom and the today's ills have blurred or disappeared. Touchdowns and defensive stops now take a back seat to bigger issues: the rash of horrific domestic abuse. Our so-called "heroes" on the field have a new dimension to their lives, and we don't like what we see. The list of the accused grows longer and longer. Former Baltimore Raven Ray Rice beat his fiancée unconscious in an elevator, then dragged her body by the hair. Ray McDonald of the San Francisco 49ers was arrested at the end of August on Domestic Violence charges. Greg Hardy of the Carolina Panthers is accused of assaulting and threatening his long-time girlfriend. Jonathan Dwyer of the Arizona Cardinals is accused of head-butting his wife, breaking her nose. The highest profile athlete, Adrian Peterson, is accused of child abuse with how he so-called "disciplined" his four-year old child with a switch until he was bruised and bleeding. What was the response? The response by the NFL and the public was mixed. The NFL honestly didn't know what to do. They first punished Ray Rice with a two game suspension, but when the video came out, he was cut from the team. All of the accused, save McDonald, are suspended indefinitely. So how do we deal with the mess? The NFL's hands are not clean. The public wants hard justice. Some just don't care or want to find excuses for the accused. What is the right response?

In football terms, the NFL has a predicament. It's 4th and 14, far from scoring. The offense stalled. Essentially, what you've been doing isn't working. It's time to punt. When a team punts, they need to start over with a new approach. It's time for the NFL to punt. But they aren't the only ones needing a new approach. Their failure is our failure; they only

follow our lead. Our lack of caring until the last minute doesn't work either; we need to punt. We need to start from scratch in our approach to these issues. There must be justice. Abuse in any form cannot be tolerated, but God's justice is not revenge. Justice exists with compassion and a humble approach for the abusers and those being abused. Let's return to scripture to chart our course with God's Justice and Christ's humility in Amos and Philippians, and we'll discuss how we better respond through the example of Jesus Christ.

You don't hear many scripture lessons from the Minor Prophets, do we? Rare are the readings from Habakkuk, Malachi, or so forth, and yet, there is a lot there. Amos was a prophet on the outskirts of society, but his message speaks to today just as much as then. "Thus says the LORD: For three transgressions of Israel and for four, I will not revoke the punishment." Israel had great indiscretions against its people. To harm the people is to sin against God, and for that there is severe punishment. And this is what they were: "They sell the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals..." and on and on. It's not that Israel made a few mistakes; it's a laundry list of severe injustice to those just seeking a life. The greatest indictment is later in the passage: "I raised up some of your children to be prophets and some of your youths to be nazirites...but you made the nazirites drink wine and commanded the prophets, 'You shall not prophecy.'" A nazirite is set aside for God's service, like Samuel. Drinking wine would break that vow. Prophets cannot be prophets unless they speak the Word of God. It's not that Israel didn't know better; they did their best to avoid the truth. They violated God's ways to stay unaware. They silenced prophets and discredited those in God's service to stay in the bliss of ignorance. This passage is an indictment of Israel not only taking advantage of the lowly but doing their best to avoid accusation. This is the calling for justice, one half of God's equation. We cannot avoid it;

there must be judgment for wrongdoing. God is a righteous God, and we often fall into the pattern of Israel more than we'd like. Those responsible must hear the wrongdoings and receive punishment. There must be tempered justice, and there must be new ears to hear.

Abuse in any form, from the physical abuse we saw rawly portrayed, to verbal abuse, to emotional abuse, indeed all forms of marginalizing pulling another human down for the benefit of the abuser, have to be recognized, stopped, and met with justice. Whether abuse happens by misdirected anger, immaturity, or just plain devaluing of others, to hit another family member has no place in our culture. It has no place in the Body of Christ or the faithful heart. Abuse of all kinds happens more than we realize in our homes and neighborhoods. It's true that the NFL needs a dramatic change in course, and there must be the proper judgment exacted on those responsible and those who have failed to act more decisively in response. Watch the coverage of these events, and you'll see pundits calling for heads and blood. They stand in superiority and self-righteousness. It sounds more like revenge. That's not God's Justice. This justice is centered in God: not revenge but authentic penance and accountability that seeks repentance by the accused. God's Justice is focused on proper penance and creating repentance; turning from the patterns of other-demeaning sinfulness to new life. It's not easy or quick, but it's the most life-giving result for all people.

But there's more guilt to be found. The double-edged sword of this passage is its conviction of those who have sinned and those who sin by refusing to hear. Many are sick of the coverage and talk, but truly, we HAVE to be reminded. It is a sin that should never be overlooked but often does. We hear stories of domestic violence all the time, and we can easily ignore it: "oh, yes, those things happen; give a slap on the wrist and move on." That may be just as serious a sin, the sin of complacency. Before we saw that raw video of Ray

Rice's incident, it was clear the NFL sinned. They didn't care to begin with; there was no precedent for punishment. Their uncaring showed as the social media outrage sparked punishment; they didn't punish because they themselves were outraged. It is our sin too. We only got mad when we saw the video, not because we heard that a woman had been abused. Let's be honest, the NFL hasn't and probably will never be the leader in addressing social issues. That is a Christian task, and we need to hold institutions like the NFL accountable. There must be justice and repentance on everyone's part to be faithful.

But judgment is only half the story. The letter to the Philippians provides great power and poetry that tells the other side of the story: the loving nature of Jesus Christ. "Being found in human form, he humbled himself." Jesus Christ, the King of the Universe entitled to be self-righteous and judgmental to a very sinful world, humbled himself. He became one of the people and felt their needs before his. He loved those in distress, not considering himself better. He called judgment upon those hypocrites that sought their own benefit at the expense of others, but his orientation was ultimately one of grace.

These two scriptures working together have a message. There is responsibility, and there is grace together. We must be people seeking God's justice against those heinously abuse. That justice seeks penance and repentance, not revenge or making us feel justified. At the same time, our hearts must be centered on care for the suffering. We ignore the victims when we let the news go in one ear and out the other. We ignore the suffering when we call it something that just happens. It's not hard to unconsciously feed the nazirite wine and silence the prophet. We must be people of compassion and humility to the suffering. If we do not follow our faith well, there is a dangerous sin lurking. If there's one thing that raises my dander, it's when people utilize scripture to push down other

people, especially those hurting. Some Christians have defended those accused of such horrible abuse by quoting scripture out of context and without any study. Women who are abused, just remember to bear the cross of your suffering, and your reward will be great in heaven. That is theological garbage, pushing down the hurting with words of life. Jesus would never advocate using the Gospel to tear down people of great worth. Those perspectives are never said by women or those abused but by those who benefit from pushing down the abused. Our spirit should be the example of Jesus the Christ as shown in Philippians. "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves." Quoting scripture of life in toxic ways is not humility; it is oppression, approving abusing the innocent. That is not allowed in the name of Christ.

I have been and will continue to be a fan of the football, but the game must come secondarily to making sure that all have the opportunity to live life abundantly. This is not the end of a conversation; this must be a beginning. The NFL needs to punt. We need to punt too. As Christians, we must honor God's justice, seeking penance and repentance among the accused and live with compassionate hearts to hear the cries of the victims. We cannot have a gospel purely of responsibility or solely of grace; it must be both. Jesus Christ was responsible but compassionate, hearing the cries of those who suffered and attended to their needs. He also called the unjust to account. Abuse in any form is to be abhorred. Violence toward loved ones shows the absence, not the fullness, of love. Today, domestic violence should be a name reviled, not forgotten as we switch to the next game. Let us seek God's justice for those who have undermined the beloved status of our neighbors while attending to the cries the victimized, and may we always do such things in the beloved name of Jesus Christ, who never stopped loving all people. Amen and Amen.