

Justice and Mercy in the Bible
The Bible and Culture – Week 8

→ **Introduction to Justice and Mercy...**

- When folks talk about “Justice and Mercy” in churches today (including our own denomination), they are usually referring to the following...
 - The meeting of material needs of believers by those within the church...
 - Also, the church seeking to institutionally address needs within the local community...
 - Poverty
 - Education
 - Racial divides
 - Systemic racism
 - Exploitative practices (like loan sharking to prostitution)
 - Crisis pregnancy centers
 - Disaster relief
 - Etc.
- Many folks in churches today are quite passionate about “Justice and Mercy” ministry and express that passion in a number of ways...
 - Rebuking churches and their members for not giving such ministry more priority...
 - Calling believers everywhere to see God’s heart for these matters of societal justice and the church’s role in such things.
 - Casting this type of ministry as the “gospel in deed” (not just in word)

→ **OT prophets on matters related to “Justice and Mercy”:**

- Consider these few examples (out of *many*)...

Micah 6:8 – ⁸ *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.*

Jeremiah 21:12 - *O house of David, thus says the LORD: "Administer justice every morning; And deliver the person who has been robbed from the power of his oppressor,*

That My wrath may not go forth like fire And burn with none to extinguish it, Because of the evil of their deeds.

Zechariah 7:9-10 –⁹ *Thus has the LORD of hosts said, 'Dispense true justice and practice kindness and compassion each to his brother; ¹⁰ and do not oppress the widow or the orphan, the stranger or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another.'*

- The people were exhorted over and over to avoid oppressing one another, particularly the weak and the disenfranchised.
- In fact, disobeying God in manners related to these issues was one of the major reasons for the Lord sending judgment (others being rampant idolatry and rampant immorality)

→ Key Aspects of Ancient Israel's economy

- Fundamental to the Israelite economy was reality of family inheritance...
 - Upon conquest of Canaan, each Israelite tribe (Levi excepted) was given a parcel of land, and each Israelite family within that tribe was given a portion as well.
 - That portion was to be passed down within that family for all the generations to come, divided up among sons, grandsons, and so on...
 - In a largely agrarian culture (shepherding and farming), each family land-inheritance was the chief source of wealth and sustenance...
- Doubtless some Israelites might have branched out into something like retail markets (buying and selling goods from other families, nations, etc), but on the whole, “new” wealth creation in Israel was extremely rare and very difficult – unlike our nation.
- There were other aspects of this system that left some Israelites economically vulnerable. For example:
 - Widows could not directly take possession of the property of their dead husband.
 - The inheritance technically belonged to her son(s), although the family was vulnerable if they were young and defenseless.
 - If the widow was childless and the dead husband had a brother, he was responsible to marry the widow and father a child with her, who would then inherit the property upon adulthood...

- But there was no penalty authorized for *not* doing this.
- Even if a young son was given to her by the brother, the vulnerabilities mentioned above still applied.
- Orphans (or the “fatherless”, see above) were also economically vulnerable during childhood...
- “Sojourners” (foreigners living in Israel) were also in a difficult spot...
 - They had no inheritance obviously...
 - Unless they had wealth or wares to sell from their homeland, they were completely dependent the generosity of Israelites for their sustenance...
- Those in great debt were also vulnerable...
 - Some Israelites (due to several bad crop years, foolish decisions, or whatever) would find themselves in great need/huge debt and would need to “sell” their inheritance and often their life into the service of another.
 - Now these people were supposed to eventually have their land and freedom restored to them (every 7 years/ 49 years), but this was doubtlessly difficult to enforce.
- It’s the nature of this economic structure and the vulnerabilities within it that provided opportunities for the Israelites to unjustly oppress one another:

Isaiah 10:1-2 – ¹ Woe to those who enact evil statutes and to those who constantly record unjust decisions, ² So as to deprive the needy of justice And rob the poor of My people of their rights, so that widows may be their spoil And that they may plunder the orphans.

→ Specific Instances of Oppression and Injustice Condemned in the Prophetic books...

- #1 - The flat-out stealing of someone’s family’s inheritance by a stronger family or individual...

Micah 2:2 - They covet fields and then seize them, and houses, and take them away. They rob a man and his house, a man and his inheritance...

- #2 - Legally cheating poorer Israelites (widows, those in debt) through bribes, false accusations, or whatever...

Isaiah 5:23 - *Who justify the wicked for a bribe, and take away the rights of the ones who are in the right!*

Amos 5:12 - *For I know your transgressions are many and your sins are great, you who distress the righteous and accept bribes and turn aside the poor in the gate [court]...*

Habakkuk 1:4 - *Therefore the law is ignored, and justice is never upheld. For the wicked surround the righteous; therefore justice comes out perverted.*

- #3 - Paying unfair wages and not paying wages that were promised, to those who were daily dependent on them...

Malachi 3:5 - *"Then I will draw near to you for judgment; and I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers and against the adulterers and against those who swear falsely, and against those who oppress the wage earner in his wages, the widow and the orphan, and those who turn aside the alien and do not fear Me," says the LORD of hosts.*

- # 4 - When those who had wealth and goods to trade/sell *cheated* in the marketplace and even purposely devalued the currency, all to get more from those dependant on their stuff (widows, orphans, those in debt, strangers, etc.)...

Micah 6:11-12 - ¹¹ *"Can I justify wicked scales and a bag of deceptive weights? ¹² "For the rich men of the city are full of violence, her residents speak lies, and their tongue is deceitful in their mouth.*

Hosea 12:6-7 – ⁶ *Therefore, return to your God, observe kindness and justice, and wait for your God continually. ⁷ A merchant, in whose hands are false balances, He loves to oppress.*

Amos 8:4-7 - ⁴ *Hear this, you who trample the needy, to do away with the humble of the land, ⁵ saying, "When will the new moon be over, so that we may sell grain, And the sabbath, that we may open the wheat market, to make the bushel smaller and the shekel bigger, and to cheat with dishonest scales, ⁶ So as to buy the helpless for money and the needy for a pair of sandals, and that we may sell the refuse of the wheat?" ⁷ The LORD has sworn by the pride of Jacob, "Indeed, I will never forget any of their deeds.*

- #5 - Consciously ignoring the immediate needs of fellow Israelites who were flat-out destitute...

Isaiah 58:7 - *Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into the house; when you see the naked, to cover him; and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?*

- The above accusations of not pursuing justice and mercy consistently revolve around specific instances of oppression through the legal system, the wage system, and at the marketplace.
- It's interesting to note what the Israelites are not condemned for in the prophetic books...
 - Being unequal in terms of wealth...
 - Enforcing private property rights...
 - For not redistributing wealth in order to create equal economic opportunities for everyone (through education, subsidies, or whatever)...
 - For not seeking to help the poor or oppressed in other countries...

→ Justice and Mercy Today

- The New Testament repeats God's desire for believers to look after the destitute and vulnerable in their midst...
 - Widows (Acts 6, 1 Tim. 5, etc.)
 - Orphans (James 1:27)
- The New Testament doesn't just limit our responsibilities to people in our own churches, but calls us to consider the needs of believers in other churches...
 - See Paul's collection for the Jerusalem famine (2 Cor., Acts, Gal. 2, etc.)
- The New Testament also makes clear that we are to go out of our way to meet the *immediate* needs of a destitute believer in our presence...

James 2:15-16 - ¹⁵ *If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food,* ¹⁶ *and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled," and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that?*

- What about the needs of unbelievers?

- One application of the Good Samaritan parable is that we should try and help anyone we personally encounter who is in obvious, life-threatening need.
 - The rest of Christ's exhortations to generosity were directed towards believers helping other members of the covenant community.
 - Remember: "the least of these, my brethren" (i.e. *believers*)
- Paul, in one verse in all his epistles, exhorts believers to take opportunity to do good to all...but still, to give great priority to the saints...

Galatians 6:10 - *So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.*

- It's difficult to find a strong Biblical press, that others see, for *all* believers today to fight for "Justice and Mercy" in our societies...
 - Obviously, believers in the legal system and business world shouldn't cheat anyone, at any time.
 - But beyond that, it's hard to find a Biblical imperative for all believers and churches to be looking to increase justice and mercy in their respective communities...
 - By soup kitchens, tutoring programs, healthcare assistance, protesting local breaches of justice...etc.
 - Where to the NT epistles exhort believers to protest the Coliseum?
 - Where are they exhorted to contact their local governors about injustice?
 - Such things are certainly fine for believers to practice *individually*...but are they *mandated* of us all? I don't think so.
 - Should churches be commanding all believers to "better their communities in some tangible justice-and-mercy way?" I'm not convinced.