

## 16. SOCIAL JUSTICE: REALIZING GOD'S VISION



**FOCUS:** Being a person of faith demands balancing spiritual pursuits with *action*. In a society which is often unjust, inequitable, and whose very structures are responsible for generating untold suffering and poverty, we are compelled to pursue social justice as an expression of hope in realizing a better world.

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### THE CALL TO "MEDDLE"

*"Talk about justice? Hush this!  
We're not supposed to discuss this – we gotta hide it in a song.  
Gotta keep things quiet – they don't want us to write about it.  
Gotta make like nothing's wrong..."*

– Victor Wooten, "Justice"

Speaking an authoritative word from Yahweh, the prophets of Hebrew scripture stood in judgment over the political and religious leaders of the people. Today, the popular notion of a prophet has been gutted of any suggestion of spiritual or moral insight in favor of the image of a prognosticator of sensational and superficial coming events.

But the call to pursue social justice has deep roots in the Biblical tradition and has been at the heart of efforts to address social, environmental, and moral injustices around the world. Theodore Parker, the great Unitarian preacher and activist, believed that the significance of religion in the first place was in its active "meddling" in public issues and "everything that affects the welfare of [humanity]." In a society which is often unjust, inequitable, and whose very structures are responsible for generating untold suffering and poverty, we are right to wonder, "Is there any word from the Lord?"

### THE PROPHETS OF HEBREW SCRIPTURE

*"Everybody cryin' mercy,  
when they don't know the meanin' of the word.  
Everybody cryin' justice,  
so long as it's business first."*

– Mose Allison

Some 750 years before the birth of Jesus, things seemed to be going fairly well in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Yet God called a shepherd and dresser of

sycamore trees named Amos to preach harsh words to a comfortable people. Amos denounced Israel and its neighbors for their reliance on military might, for grave injustice in social dealings, for their abhorrent immorality, and their shallow, meaningless piety. Needless to say, he was unpopular with religious and political leaders – and anyone else whose status, wealth, and security relied on maintaining the status quo.

Sadly, today's popular understanding of "prophecy" has essentially been gutted of its distinguished Biblical heritage in favor of divination of the future, clairvoyance, and a scandalous misuse of the Bible to predict sensational and superficial notions of apocalypse. Wallowing in angst-ridden conjectures of divine retribution and "we told you sos," somber predictors of doom string together unrelated Biblical texts in order to stuff their coffers by scaring the masses.

Far from foretelling some inescapable future, the prophets of Hebrew scripture stood in judgment over the political and religious leaders of the people and proclaimed a conditional future: what happens next is directly contingent upon how the religious, ethical, and political corruption of the day was dealt with.

While different in style, tone and context, each of the Hebrew prophets had the same concern about justice and community – about being the people of God, together. They were not solitary figures, isolated from the experiences of the real world, but members of the community living in the midst of life and all its struggles. Be it the three "major" prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, or the twelve shorter works known as the "minor" prophets, their dominant concern was the relationship of a people to their God.

Incidentally, the term "minor" refers to the work's length, not importance. They also may have been grouped together because they all fit nicely on one scroll. They are:

Hosea	Obadiah	Nahum	Haggai
Joel	Jonah	Habakkuk	Zechariah
Amos	Micah	Zephaniah	Malachi

With the exception of Jonah (who's remembered more for his actions than his words), these short books are comprised mostly of what the prophets *said* as spokespersons for God. What they said has less to do with foretelling the future than telling what God's will is for the people of God.

It's important to remember that the judgment they predict isn't an unavoidable divine punishment but an effort to call people back into a relationship with God. No matter how dire the circumstances, their words were tempered with the simple expectation that is at the heart of Biblical faith: hope for the future.

## A DIFFERENT GOD

In his book, *The Source*, James Michener tells the story of a Canaanite village in

pre-biblical days. The time was 2,200 years before Christ, and the Canaanites in that village worshiped numerous gods of the earth. It was a fertility religion, and among the numerous gods was the goddess Astarte. In every home there were voluptuous clay figurines of Astarte and her male companions. These people, sad to say, practiced human sacrifice to the god Malek, in the belief that if they sacrificed the lives of their first-born sons, the gods would be so pleased that they would make the people more fertile. Temple prostitutes were provided by the priests to the men of the village as part of their fertility rites.

Timna, the protagonist in Michener's story, could not accept the sacrifice of her first-born son, nor could she accept the behavior of her husband with a particularly young and erotic temple prostitute. Michener writes: "Timna, still grieving for her son, watched the performance dispassionately and muttered, 'What folly! The fertility is in the soil. It is in me'." And while others celebrated she walked slowly homeward, seeing life in new and painful clarity; with different gods her husband Urbaal would have been a different man, and she went into his godroom, looked with abhorrence at the four Astartes, and methodically smashed [them] along with their phallic companions.

With a different god, he would have been a different man.

According to John Dominic Crossan, one of the most pressing questions for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Christians is, "What is the Character of Your God?" The character of the God in whom we place our allegiance shapes our character as people of faith. The prophets remind us of God's character. Although Crossan is quick to point out that we can't generalize the message of the prophets as, for example, non-violence (the first two prophets, Elijah and Elisha, were extremely violent), a recurrent, pronounced theme on the prophets' lips is divine justice. The God of the Bible is a just God. Although God's justice is often misunderstood as a retributive justice, it instead a justice about *distribution*, says Crossan. In other words, God is concerned about fairness and equality, not vengeance and retribution. A violent god begets a violent people, a god who seeks fairness and equality begets a people who seek fairness and equality.

## TAKE THIS HEART...

*"For many years of my life I detested the text of Isaiah 53:10 'It has pleased the Lord to bruise the servant.' So I decided to go to the Jerusalem Bible to see if the Catholics could help me out. They read it, 'It has pleased the Lord to crush the servant!' But then I've lived long enough to discover that the only people who have really made any difference in my life are the people who God has taken and sand-papered the cockles of their hearts until they could not walk by a hungry child, a crying woman, or a hardened man. It has pleased the Lord to bruise the servant. And I thank God for what is, in many ways, the ultimate maturity of the spiritual life. It's no accident that the 53<sup>rd</sup> chapter of Isaiah and the*

*song of the suffering servant is more quoted in the New Testament than any other single chapter of the Old – and is half the text of Handel's Messiah. Can you hear me? Submission – that submission which understands that the gospel is bad news before it can really be good news."*

– Harrell Beck, May 13, 1986  
Preaching Conference, Arrowhead Springs, California

Jesus calls would-be followers to "Repent, and believe in the good news!" (Mark 1:15) This repentance leaves behind destructive, violent, unjust beliefs and practices in favor of becoming collaborators with God in seeking justice. Benedictine Sister Dawn Annette Mills suggests that the word *repent* carries with it the call "to crumble." In modern-day vernacular, she suggests repentance is something like the *roto-tilling* of the heart. Time and again the Bible speaks of hardened hearts as a metaphor for ignorance or acceptance of suffering and injustice. Repentance leads to the softening of one's heart. Likewise, hardened soil also needs water for softening. Mills suggests tears as an effective strategy for softening hearts. Concern for justice can then take root.

The last song on U2's *How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb* is really a psalm – a sung prayer entitled "Yahweh." The song closes with the line, "Take this heart and make it break." A hardened heart is of no use to God. God desires our hearts to crumble and break on account of injustice – thus prompting us to rise up impassioned in God's name to do something about it.

Mills points out that the Latin behind the word *compunction* means "punctured; a punctured heart." The role of the prophets is to pierce our hearts, to make them crumble and break on account of injustice.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote,

*"A student of philosophy who turns from the discourses of the great metaphysicians to the orations of the prophets may feel as if he were going from the realm of the sublime to an area of trivialities. Instead of dealing with the timeless issues of being and becoming, of matter and form, of definitions and demonstrations, he is thrown into orations about widows and orphans, about the corruption of judges and affairs of the market place. Instead of showing us a way through the elegant mansions of the mind, the Prophets take us to the slums. Their breathless impatience with injustice may strike us as hysteria. . . . But if such deep sensitivity to evil is to be called hysterical, what name should be given to the abysmal indifference to evil which the prophet bewails?"*

– The Prophets

Psalm 51 declares "a broken and contrite heart God will not despise." When nursing a bruise or a hurt, all it takes is for someone to brush up against it and you twinge from the sharp pain. Such sensitivity is a prime characteristic of a

person of faith. Hearts are softened by tears shed in the face of injustice. Hearts are broken from confronting an "abysmal indifference" to suffering and evil. What breaks your heart? What brings tears to your eyes? Poverty? Abuse? Disease? Inadequate housing? Capital punishment? War? Illiteracy? Greed? Perhaps God is inviting you to do something about it. "Repent, and believe in the good news."

## DOING JUSTICE, LOVING KINDNESS, AND WALKING HUMBLY WITH GOD

*"As a people of faith we must live our lives not always comforted by the holy but haunted by God's call to live a prophetic life."*

– Emilie Townes

The author of James asks, "What does it profit someone if they say they have faith but have not works? Can their faith save them? If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food and one of you says to them, "Go in peace and be warmed and filled . . ." [That is, you say to them just some pious platitude.] Without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead."

Being a disciple is not only a matter of receiving, but doing. Upon closer investigation, it seems that what passes for Christianity today is really *two* different religions. One encourages people to ask, "What can God do for me?" (save me, give me victory, make me prosperous and successful) while the other asks, "What can I do for God?" (What gifts have I been given to serve the less fortunate and change the world for the better?) When someone asks you, "Are you saved?" what they mean is, "Have you had a personal experience of God's grace in your life so that you can accept Jesus as your personal Savior?" What they don't ask is: "Have you been in relationship with the poor in this world? Have you fed the hungry? Are you seeking justice for the oppressed?"

For many, the thought of seeking social justice is an intimidating proposition. Yet God's vision for the world can only be realized as each one of us sets ourselves to practicing even the smallest task toward the goal.

*"The prophetic life is one in which you live your faithfulness out of a steadiness, and that is often hard for us to do. We do really good with these rushes of faithfulness (but) the mortal life is the life of the mundane. It is doing the right thing day after day after day and moment after moment. It is not these big movements. It is not these big statements of great profound eloquence. It really is doing it every day. I cannot say it often enough: treating people fairly, decently – respecting them for who they are – knowing that none of us is perfect."*

– Emilie Townes, *Living the Questions*

In 1966, thirty long years before the fall of Apartheid, South African students heard Robert Kennedy proclaim:

*“Some believe there is nothing one man or one woman can do against the enormous array of the world’s ills. Yet many of the world’s great movements of thought and action have flowed from the work of a single person... It is from numberless diverse acts of courage and belief that human history is shaped. Each time a person stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he or she sends forth a tiny ripple of hope. And crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.”*

The prophets appealed to the people of God to wake up to the injustices being perpetrated right in their midst. Each person standing up, striking out against injustice – even in the midst of the mundane – sends out a ripple of hope.

At its core, Biblical faith has a sense of expectation called hope. The prophets clung to the conviction that judgment proclaimed out of hope for a renewed relationship with the Divine would yield a better, more just and peaceful future. Far from being hateful or “unpatriotic,” today’s prophets engage in social criticism out of that same hope, a conviction that “doing justice” is essential to expressing both a vital faith and building a world at peace.

*“I don’t know what your destiny will be, but one thing I do know: the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who have sought and found out how to serve.”*

– Albert Schweitzer

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## DVD DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

*(note: Chapter 1 of each DVD session is the introductory story)*

### **DVD Chapter 2:**

What are some of the characteristics of justice as “God’s own will for us as we live together?”

### **DVD Chapter 3:**

How might the ideas of caring and “being comfortable” conflict?

List the characteristics of “prophetic theology:”

**DVD Chapter 4:**

How does fixating on the “virtue of individuals” legitimate the social structure?

Compare and contrast “procedural justice” with a “justice of the common good.”

What are the implications of people of faith being aware of the notion of “systemic justice?”

**DVD Chapter 5:**

How did the writing of the creeds change the fundamental tenets of Christianity?

How does Jesus’ call to liberation and justice conflict with the values of the dominant culture then and now?

How was Jesus’ strategy different from that of the prophets of Hebrew scripture?

Sr. Prejean suggests that the justice Jesus demanded is expressed in a “preferential love for poor people, for prisoners, for battered women, for children who are in poverty.” Explain.

**Questions for Personal Reflection:**

What do you find most helpful/interesting from the material in this session?

What are the implications of this material for you personally? For your local fellowship? For the wider Church? For Christianity as a whole?

**Consider the following questions as a group:**

What has this session challenged or changed about the way you think about the Divine? People? The Church? Yourself? The relationship of all these?

**SPIRITPRACTICE**

A song over food with John Bell:

Every nation has a different gift with different insights to offer. Worship songs of the Southern Hemisphere tend to be much more upfront about social justice than those from the Northern Hemisphere.

*“God bless to us our bread,  
and give food to all those who are hungry,  
And hunger for justice to those who are fed.  
God bless to us our bread.” \**

This grace from Argentina and other Southern Hemisphere songs are available on CD and in book form in the collection, *“Love and Anger: Songs of lively faith and social justice sung by the Wild Goose Worship Group”* by John L Bell and Graham Maule. Available from: [www.ionabooks.com/bookshop](http://www.ionabooks.com/bookshop). The Songbook is ISBN#: 094798898X

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**Be sure to follow up on this session's theme with Session 16's *Living it Out:*  
“Las Madres,” distributed by your facilitator.**