

“Christian Virtues: Justice” Lev. 19:9-10; Amos 5:21-24; Luke 4:16-19

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When I was growing up, we attended the Cherrydale Baptist Church in Arlington, Va., within sight of the Washington Monument. The church prided itself on being Bible-based, focusing on salvation through Jesus Christ, personal morality, and reformed theology. However, although I grew up there during the 1960's, I never heard a word about the major moral issues facing our society at that time- civil rights for African Americans and the war in Viet Nam. Those issues were considered political (not spiritual) matters, matters that did not belong in worship. In fact, we criticized other churches for neglecting the Bible and the gospel in order to deal with those sorts of things!

I suspect that there are some people here today who believe the same thing. That worship should be a time that focuses on biblical and spiritual things, not political or societal things. But when we look at the issue of justice, this morning's Christian virtue, we are pushed into issues that involve both society and politics. And justice is certainly a biblical virtue, though I heard very little about it at church during my childhood and youth.

So let's do a quick overview of what the Bible has to say about justice and then try to figure out what that means for us today. Let's start with the

Book of Ruth. It tells the famous story of how Ruth, a young foreign widow, finds herself in Israel, looking for a husband to take care of her. In those days single women had few options, and most ended up either begging or working as prostitutes to support themselves. But Ruth took advantage of the ancient practice of gleaning to help make ends meet. In the book of Leviticus, we can read the law commanding this practice. ⁹*When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest.* ¹⁰*You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the LORD your God. (Lev. 19:9.10)*

Farmers were commanded to leave the edges of their fields unharvested and to leave behind grain and grapes that they missed, so that the poor and migrants might harvest them and sustain themselves. This is an ancient form of welfare or support for the poor, and Ruth used it to support both herself and her widowed mother-in-law. The law assumes that land ownership is not absolute, since God in fact owns the land, and can therefore determine how it can or cannot be used. And this law shows that God cares about providing some level of justice for the poor, widows, orphans, and fatherless.

Let's move on. The entire book of Exodus also demonstrates God's concern for those who are oppressed and enslaved, like the ancient

Hebrews were in Egypt. Eventually, God dramatically intervened on their behalf to give them freedom and justice. The Psalmist puts it like this,

⁵Father of orphans and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation.

⁶God gives the desolate a home to live in; he leads out the prisoners to prosperity, but the rebellious live in a parched land. (Ps. 68:5,6) God clearly identifies with those who are poor and in need, calling himself their Father and protector.

Unfortunately, God's people often failed to live up to the character of God in their actions toward their fellow citizens. Time and again, the prophets thundered against the Israelites' exploitation and neglect of the poor. Listen to these words from the book of Amos, as God criticizes their worship! *I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream. (Amos 5:21-24)*

God rejects worship that is not accompanied by justice and righteousness! Throughout the Old Testament, God takes the side of those who are poor and oppressed and calls to account those who oppress or

neglect them. To follow God means to treat others compassionately and justly. In the New Testament, Jesus, quoting from the prophet Isaiah, sees his ministry as a continuation of this calling. ¹⁶*When (Jesus) came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: ¹⁸“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, ¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, ‘Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’* (Luke 4:16-21)

In his first recorded sermon, Jesus announces that his ministry will be directed to the poor and oppressed. And those were the kind of people Jesus hung out with and ministered to! And he told the disciples that when they provide food for the poor or visit those who are in jail, they are actually doing those things to the Lord himself!

We’ve just scratched the surface of the biblical teaching about justice, but it’s all over the Bible from beginning to end. Clearly, it is something that is near to God’s heart, and clearly, like the other virtues, God wants us to

imitate his passion for it. If you'd like to go deeper on this, I would recommend the book, Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger, by Ron Sider, a former professor at Messiah College, a book that deeply affected my own attitude toward the poor. It's in our church library.

So, God calls us to advocate for justice, but where do we find injustice and oppression in our contemporary world? There are many countries where the heavy oppression of free expression, religious liberty, and economic liberty are part of daily life- North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Myanmar, China, and Tajikistan, to name just a few. Christian brothers and sisters are suffering in these places. I believe that if our country wants to be on God's side, we need to use whatever leverage we have to improve the lot of helpless people in those countries. There used to be bipartisan support for such measures, but sadly, American business interests seem to be a higher priority today.

And we've got our share of injustice here at home, too. On a micro level, we've got bullying in our schools and on-line, which creates a fear-filled learning environment for some of our students. The "See something. Say something." campaign is a good start to counter this form of injustice, but we can do more. On a national scale, the recent Netflix miniseries, "When They See Us," highlighted the wrongful convictions of five African-American men in Central Park for rape and assault. The lead prosecutor in

the case, Linda Fairstein, comes under criticism for coercing the confessions of the men, and then hiding exculpatory evidence. The men eventually received a \$41 million settlement from New York City, but the case highlights the ongoing problems African-Americans experience with our justice systems around the country, where they are routinely incarcerated at much higher rates and for longer sentences than white folks who commit the exact same crimes. That is not justice, and it must stop. We need to continue to work on our justice system.

The issue of hunger and food-insecurity is a justice issue, too. It is estimated that 40 million Americans live with food insecurity. The largest factor is underemployment. People making minimum wage or close to it must regularly choose between making the car payment, paying the rent, paying for medicines, or paying for food. They simply don't make enough income to pay for all these necessities. Some of you have experienced that firsthand. Ministries of compassion, like SCAAP, Gettysburg CARES, and Ruth's Harvest are an important part of the solution, but the problem points to a larger injustice in the way our society operates. Hard-working people shouldn't have to worry about having enough food to eat. God cares about that and we should too.

We could talk about refugees, immigrants, those being trafficked for sex, ex-offenders, people of color, women, LGBTQ people, etc.- all groups

who struggle to receive justice at times in our country. And I hope you will advocate for such people as well as for other justice issues. It's what God's people do, according to the Bible. My home church failed to tell me that, but you don't have that excuse!

But know that such advocacy is costly. When people in the past advocated for the abolition of slavery and child labor, and for the right of women to vote and for civil rights for all our citizens- things that I hope we all agree were right and important- when people advocated for these things, they paid a high price.

They were mocked and berated. They were shunned on individual and family levels. They were hated and spit on. They were jailed. And some were even killed. When you go around challenging the way things are, ways that have been beneficial to many people, people are going to push back. But we keep going, because in the words of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., one of those who paid the ultimate price for his pro-justice work, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." That is another way of saying what Jesus had to say about the Kingdom of God. That ultimately God's will will be done on earth, just like it is done in heaven. I think we prayed for something like that earlier in the service, didn't we? And God's will is clearly that there be justice for all people.

How will you be part of bringing that about?