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To Act Justly and Love Mercy

TIMOTHY WILLIS

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world" (Jas 1.27).

It has become common in some Christian circles for preachers and theologians to appeal to passages such as this to call their listeners to lives of social justice. Some do so in reaction to those who understand Christian faith almost exclusively in terms of doctrine. Others seek to expand the perspective of those who would restrict Christian morality and values to matters of personal purity. The NT foundations for this appeal extend far beyond this one passage, though, resting on numerous teachings of Jesus and his followers. For example, Jesus' blessings in the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6.20–23) and his teachings about the Final Judgment (Matt 25.31–46) illustrate his fundamental concern for the needy and persecuted. Matthew explains healings by Jesus on the Sabbath as the fulfillment of OT prophecies about "justice to the Gentiles" (Matt 12.15–21), and Jesus refers to "justice and mercy and faith" as "the weightier matters of the law" (Matt 23.23). In a similar vein, he opens his ministry in the Gospel of Luke with a reading from Isaiah 61 about "the year of the Lord's favor" on the poor and oppressed (Luke 4.17–21).

These passages remind us that the NT call for social justice is a continuation of an appeal from God that begins in the OT. The laws of Moses specifically call for the Israelites to provide for the needs of aliens, orphans and widows in Israelite communities (Lev 19.9–10, 33–34; 23.22; Deut 10.12–19; 24.14–22). Jeremiah draws a parallel between "doing justice and righteousness" and "judging the cause of the poor and needy" (Jer 22.15–16; cf. 7.5–7). He and other OT prophets in particular are remembered for their frequent criticisms of the oppressive social conditions of their day. One common accusation is that the people show themselves to be spiritually bankrupt by focusing on the offering of sacrifices and other ritual acts, while neglecting—or worse yet, causing—the physical hardships of their neighbors. The prophets call for them instead to imitate the Lord by performing acts of justice, righteousness and mercy toward their neighbors. Micah's words are some of the more famous in this regard:

> Shall I come before the Lord with burnt offerings,
> with calves a year old?
> . . . He has told you, O mortal, what is good.
> And what does the Lord require of you?
> But to do justice, and to love kindness,
> and to walk humbly with your God?
> (Mic 6.6–8; cf. Isa 1.10–17; 58.5–8; Amos 5.4–15)

Despite frequent references by Christians to these biblical teachings, my experience is that many of us have a rather fuzzy conception of what the biblical writers mean when they speak of doing "justice and

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righteousness." We understand little about the social circumstances of the time or the plight of the social groups mentioned in these biblical texts, and this makes it difficult for us to internalize and personalize the teachings about justice and righteousness. Some of us lump all oppressed groups together under the umbrella of "the poor," and so we think of social justice as a monolithic, societal-level effort to alleviate poverty and the social ills that accompany it. We fall into the trap of viewing social justice too narrowly (or too broadly), as a problem that can only be addressed through the cooperative efforts of an entire society. Some have even come to regard justice as a social issue—not a religious issue—that should be handled by the government, and so the only responses they consider when there are appeals for social justice are monetary contributions and voluntary participation in government-sponsored programs.

To be sure, these efforts are extremely important and worthwhile, and all monetary donations and volunteer efforts deserve praise for the ways in which they alleviate suffering. They are part of God's work on earth. By way of comparison, there are several biblical passages that focus attention on the kings and their officials, as they devote (or fail to devote) the government's energies and resources on a broad scale to the needs of the poor and needy, the widows and the orphans (2 Sam 8.15; 1 Kgs 10.9; Psalm 72; Jer 22.15–16). But these examples constitute only part of the picture of what God calls for through scripture. In the biblical world, doing justice and righteousness was a concern to be addressed just as much by individuals and local communities of individuals as by governments and the community of believers as a whole. Boaz's efforts to care for Naomi and Ruth provide but one good example of this; Elisha's concern for the childless Shunammite woman is another (2 Kgs 4). The laws of Moses require not only that government officials do justice and righteousness; the laws apply to everyone. Likewise, the prophets direct their calls for justice to the whole nation, not just her political leaders. So it is important for us to develop a fuller understanding of what is involved in the call for justice and righteousness.

We gain greater clarity about the expectations that God places on individuals by becoming better informed about the basic social structure of Israel and the economic forces by which it operated. With this information in hand, we can better appreciate how individuals can address the needs of groups like the "aliens, orphans and widows." Then we can more directly apply these important teachings to do justice and righteousness in our lives as Christians today.

Israel's Social Structure

The OT provides consistent indications that the Israelites understood themselves to be a people comprising a single, extended family tree. Jacob—who has his name changed to Israel—is the father of twelve sons. Those twelve sons become the fathers of the twelve tribes of Israel. Their sons and grandsons are identified as the fathers of clans, and within those clans we find a steady succession of households consisting of groups of "men" (adult males with property, and their dependents). We can see the upper layers of this system in texts like Numbers 1–3, 26 and 1 Chronicles 1–9, which give the core genealogies for the tribes and clans. The stories about the selection of Achan (Josh 7.14–18) and then Saul (1 Sam 10.20–21) reflect the full range of the genealogical levels. Social anthropologists refer to this social structure as a segmentary lineage system, and there are several examples of this and similar kinship-based systems in various parts of the world today. Israel's system was patriarchal (power resided in the fathers/males) and patrimonial (the men controlled the wealth), which is also common for this type of social system. This meant that every member of the society had to be attached in some way to a man with property, if they wanted social stability and financial security.

The smallest social unit was considered to be a "man," but "man" as a social designation actually entailed many persons. One of the clearest examples of this is embedded in the instructions for annual feast days in Deuteronomy 16. Most of the laws in Deuteronomy refer to the listeners as "you," but these laws go into greater detail about what the term "you" implies. The laws call on the listeners—"you"—to celebrate the bounteous produce of the land; but then the text expands on this designation, specifying that the worshipers include "you, your sons and your daughters, your male and female slaves, the Levites resident

in your towns, as well as the strangers, the orphans, and the widows who are among you." One man with property ("you") provided financial security for all the people listed, and so they were to some degree all "one" with him.

Archaeological findings, coupled with ethnographic studies, show how one's social identity, rights and obligations spread out in concentric circles from this core unit. A "man" with all his brothers and cousins comprised a "house," all the houses with a common clan ancestor comprised a clan, and all the clans descended from the same son of Jacob comprised a tribe. This lineage structure was reflected in Israel's communities and tribal territories. Archaeology reveals that the typical Israelite dwelling would have housed the members of one nuclear family and their social dependents (i.e., one "man"). These dwellings are typically arranged in clusters around courtyards. One cluster in a town or one small village by itself would hold thirty to seventy-five people, and this would be roughly equivalent to a household. Modern analogies suggest that an average town would consist of several closely-related households, and a small collection of towns (or one large city) and their neighboring villages would comprise a clan. A tribe amounted to a grouping of clans in a common territory.

These kinship-based groupings had a profound influence on how individuals understood their social obligations to those around them. Ideally, their strongest loyalties and responsibilities were directed through bloodlines to their individual families. Their ties to those in the broader household would be slightly weaker, their sense of obligation to fellow clan members beyond their own household would be weaker yet; even more fragile were their loyalties to other members of their tribe, and the thinnest ties were to members of other tribes within the nation.

The most obvious implications of these graduated social ties were manifested in the area of financial security. Pressures regularly pulled individuals in opposite directions. There was a constant desire for financial self-sufficiency (to "make a name for yourself"), but for most this was outweighed by the practical need for cooperative group efforts in order to survive and thrive. The economic cornerstone for the vast majority of the population was ownership and use of the land, either by cultivating crops or herding flocks. This is demonstrated in many OT stories and laws, particularly those concerning the retention of inheritance.

Naturally, then, individuals who did not own land automatically found themselves at risk of economic hardship. Children quickly learned that they were dependent on a father or a grandfather or an uncle who owned land for their financial well-being. Without such a man, the children would find themselves in the precarious position of being orphans. Adult women were acutely aware of their reliance on a husband or brother for their financial security, and they had great anxiety about becoming widows. Many adults attached themselves to landholders by becoming servants. Strangers ("aliens") were individuals like Naomi and her family in Moab, or Ruth in Bethlehem, persons who had been forced off their land and out of the safety net of clan/tribal territories. They were left to seek help from distant landholders, individuals who did not necessarily feel a strong personal sense of obligation to them. This is why finding someone like Boaz was so important to Naomi and Ruth. The Levites also understood the perpetually precarious nature of their situation, because they were not afforded their own tribal land, but had to rely on the good graces of other tribes for property and the security that went with it.

Obligations of Individuals to Do Justice and Righteousness

The preceding information makes it obvious why biblical writers regularly voice concerns for widows, orphans, aliens, Levites and the needy. These groups are the most vulnerable individuals—financially and socially—in the Israelite population. There is an expectation that the king and his government will provide some assistance to these at-risk individuals (e.g., Mic 6.1–4, 8–11), but the first line of defense is assistance provided by a person's financially secure relatives and neighbors. Prophetic calls for justice are not simply sentimental appeals to pity the less fortunate. The assumed primary listeners in most OT legal and prophetic texts are the male landholders, and those to whom they are to show justice and righteousness are their own

relatives and neighbors and dependents. We can see the personal nature of these social expectations in the lives of individuals like Ruth and Naomi, who look to their own "people" for help in their time of need. Laws like the tithe law in Deut 14.28–29 carry a similar expectation, because they call for storing the tithes "in your towns" and distributing them to the widows and orphans and other needy persons "in your towns."

The prophecies of Micah suggest a systemic breakdown of the primary financial security network of Israelite families in his day. He laments the schemes devised against legitimate landholders (Mic 2.1–2), a practice that apparently begins with the national leaders and officials, but which then extends down into all levels of society and into every community (Mic 3.1–4, 8–11). He speaks in general of wickedness, dishonesty and deceit in matters of business (Mic 6.10–12). But this is not an "it's not personal, it's business" attitude that one might show in a calloused way toward strangers, because Micah mentions disloyalty and distrust of brothers, neighbors and extended family members (Mic 7.2, 5–6). The king and his authorities might be able to alleviate some of this suffering, but what Micah is really calling for is a change in the hearts of people living in towns throughout the nation.

In my opinion, the personal qualities of justice and righteousness that Micah and other prophets seek are best exemplified in the words of Job. We are all familiar with the suffering of Job, and we are appalled by the unsympathetic stance taken by his friends. One aspect of this that is easy to miss is that the main accusation lodged by Job's friends is that he has been unrighteous. Job introduces his closing arguments by asserting his righteousness (Job 27.5–6), and the narrator informs us that the friends finally fall silent "because Job was righteous in his own eyes" (Job 32.1). The chapters in between these two passages—all spoken by Job—constitute a pair of discourses on a life of righteousness.

Job's second discourse is particularly enlightening about justice and righteousness at the local level. He describes himself as one who goes to the city gate and takes his seat, and the people listen when he speaks (Job 29.7–10, 21–25). This is a description of a local elder, from which we can infer that Job was a leading citizen—and a relatively wealthy landowner—in his community. Assuming that Job is deserving of the praise he receives at the beginning of the book, he should be Exhibit A for justice and righteousness as envisioned in the biblical laws and prophetic oracles. We need to pay attention, then, to the terms with which Job the elder defends his reputation. He says:

> When the ear heard, it commended me,
> and when the eye saw, it approved;
> because I delivered the poor who cried,
> and the orphan who had no helper.
> The blessing of the wretched came upon me,
> and I caused the widow's heart to sing for joy.
> I put on *righteousness,* and it clothed me;
> my *justice* was like a robe and a turban.
> I was eyes to the blind
> and feet to the lame.
> I was a father to the needy,
> and I championed the cause of the stranger.
> I broke the fangs of the unrighteous,
> and made them drop their prey from their teeth.
> (Job 29.11–17)

We need to recognize the disparate social positions of the characters mentioned here. Job represents one of the "haves" in his society. The individuals that he helps are the "have-nots." They have no voice in their community because they have no financial clout. This does not matter to Job. He gives no thought to what they offer to the community; they are the community. He raises no questions about their "potential contributions to society." He could overlook and ignore them; he could be blind to their plight and deaf

to their pleas, but he chooses to honor them as people; he chooses to do justice and righteousness (see Isa 32.1–8). A couple of chapters later Job says that he does not reject the complaints voiced by his servants; he responds to them because, "Did not he who made me in the womb make them?" (Job 31.13–14). Such an attitude is foundational to a life of justice and righteousness. It recognizes the sacredness of the life—in its fullest biblical sense—that resides within every person, and it seeks to preserve and cultivate that life.

Doing Justice and Righteousness in the Twenty-First Century

The words of Job—like the words of Moses and the prophets, and like the words of Jesus and the apostles—represent a strong and compelling challenge for modern Christians. For Job, doing justice and righteousness involves meeting the needs of the people around us, and providing relief and comfort to those who cannot provide those things for themselves. Job shows us that those of us with the means must address matters of justice and righteousness in our own communities, even in our own congregations. We must be careful not to become calloused. If we are not careful, we can fail to recognize the risks—both physical and spiritual—that our brothers and sisters face. If we are not careful, we can neglect the life needs of our own church family. If we are not careful, we can fail to do justice and righteousness. Job's words challenge us to honor and cultivate the life that is present in every member of our congregation. We do this first by identifying for ourselves what persons are at risk of being overlooked and ignored. At the most basic level, we notice who among us has no voice and we speak on their behalf. Of course, this means that we first must make the time listen to them. We must hear their voice, so that we can then speak for them. We must come to know their needs, and then we can look for ways to meet those needs.

Let me conclude by pointing out some of the groups within our congregations who are at risk in ways that we might overlook or ignore. One group consists of single adults. There are more and more young adults in our churches, yet we might minimize their struggles and needs if we are older adults with spouses and children. Some of us have long since forgotten—or never experienced—what it was like to be twenty-five or thirty-five years old and single. Such individuals face special risks that we might be unaware of. We need to hear them. The same might be said of people who are recent converts to Christianity. If we grew up going to church, we can be unaware of the different struggles of these new brothers and sisters; but we must become the voice for these individuals. If we are homeowners, we probably are not attuned to the risks faced by many in our churches who live in rented apartments and houses. If we hold what we used to call white-collar jobs, we might be unfamiliar with the special risks and concerns faced by blue-collar workers. There might be similar challenges to face in ministering to the needs of those who have been confronted with lack of employment due to downsizing and other economic shifts, or the needs of those with a minimal education, or those in special physical and mental situations, or several other members of our society whose paths we have not walked.

The biblical writers call on us to do justice and righteousness. As Job and others show, this means that we recognize those things that threaten to deprive our fellow human beings of the life that God wishes everyone to have. This life is both physical and spiritual. We must honor the lives of everyone in our community and work to preserve and strengthen those lives. We must be eyes to the blind and feet to the lame. We must do justice and righteousness.

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