

Hunger For Justice
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Amos 5:21-24

(Amos 5:21-24 NRSV) I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. {22} 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. {23} Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. {24} But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

This morning I am continuing our LENTEN series on the things that we hunger for. Last week Nathan shared our hunger for relationships.

This week I am going to focus on something that we often say that we hunger for, but our actions suggest otherwise → and that is JUSTICE!

Tony Campolo tells a powerful story which speaks of our understanding of Justice as he tells of some of the reactions that we had as a country following the tragedy of September 11th. He writes:

I worry about vengeance, given that vengeance can be a very destructive mindset. And may I point out that I differ with Senator McCain when he says: "God may give them mercy, but they'll get none from us." Of all the senators I've heard speak, I thought Senator Mikulski from Maryland said the best thing. In that great prayer meeting they held under the Capital dome, she said: "I pray, dear God, that you will bring those who perpetrated this evil"....and there I sat, waiting for her to say "to justice." But instead, she said "to repentance." For that's our hope, that the repetitive cycle of violence will be grounded and that, with repentance, lives will be changed and a new day will dawn.

Most of us see justice as God paying back those who hurt or harm us.

But that is not how the prophets in the Hebrew Bible understood Justice.

In the Biblical understanding there are three types of justice that are spoken of.

God as Judge and Guardian of Justice
Fairness of God's Justice
God's Justice in Relation to the Poor

Let's take a minute and examine each of these understandings of Justice.

God as Judge and Guardian of Justice

The Israelites understood that God was Judge of the whole earth.

This understanding comes because the Israelites understood that God was creator of the whole earth. As creator, God would establish equity and justice.

Psalm 97:1-2 (NIV)

The LORD reigns, let the earth be glad;
let the distant shores rejoice.
Clouds and thick darkness surround him;
righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne.

God's very nature was understood to be one of justice.

Justice was a central theme to the Israelites because they were very concerned with social relationships among themselves as a people covenanted to God --- but also to the surrounding nations.

They understood that God would administer justice by punishing those whose conduct made the lives of others difficult in the world.

Psalm 94:1-3 (The Message)

God, put an end to evil; avenging God, show your colors!
Judge of the earth, take your stand;
throw the book at the arrogant.

God, the wicked get away with murder—
how long will you let this go on?

God was summoned to judge the nations for their disregard of justice in their social dealings with other people.

Psalm 9:7-8 (NIV)

The LORD reigns forever; he has established his throne for judgment. He will judge the world in righteousness; he will govern the peoples with justice.

Thus it is not piety that God requires of us, but that we practice justice.

No one more clearly pointed this out than the prophet Micah.

Micah 6:6-8 (NRSV)

"With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?

{7} Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" {8} 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?

In the Hebrew Bible, God's justice is manifested in his retribution to all people and nations according to their just deserts.

Those who felt unjustly treated by others in social, economic, and political relationships summoned God to judge them, in other words, to do justice by saving them from their enemies or oppressors.

Psalms 7:6-11 (NIV)

Arise, O LORD, in your anger; rise up against the rage of my enemies. Awake, my God; decree justice. {7} Let the assembled peoples gather around you. Rule over them from on high; {8} let the LORD judge the peoples. Judge me, O LORD, according to my righteousness, according to my integrity, O Most High. {9} O righteous God, who searches minds and hearts, bring to an end the violence of the wicked and make the righteous secure. {10} My shield is God Most High, who saves the upright in heart. {11} God is a righteous judge, a God who expresses his wrath every day.

The second understand of Justice that the Hebrew people had is the:
Fairness of God's Justice

The Israelites expected God's justice to be fair because it came from a God who was a righteous judge as Psalm 7 just reminded us.

Psalms 119:137 (NRSV)

You are righteous, O LORD, and your judgments are right.

Psalms 145:17 (NRSV)

The LORD is just in all his ways, and kind in all his doings.

The book of Exodus reminds us that those who were appointed to the office of Judge or magistrate were expected to reflect God's holy nature.

Exodus 18:21 (NIV)

select capable men from all the people--men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain--and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens.

When a judge was to execute justice, the Israelites understood them to be acting as agents or deputies of God.

And they were to do it fairly!

God was not seen as capricious or wishy washy.

The third Hebrew understanding of Justice is:
God's Justice in Relation to the Poor

Throughout the Bible, especially in the Psalms and the Prophets, God is understood as having a special concern for the poor, particularly the widow, the orphan, and the oppressed.

Psalms 10:17-18 (NRSV)

O LORD, you will hear the desire of the meek; you will strengthen their heart, you will incline your ear {18} to do justice for the orphan and the oppressed, so that those from earth may strike terror no more.

Psalm 82 (The Message)

God calls the judges into his courtroom, he puts all the judges in the dock.

"Enough! You've corrupted justice long enough,
you've let the wicked get away with murder.
You're here to defend the defenseless,
to make sure that underdogs get a fair break;
Your job is to stand up for the powerless,
and prosecute all those who exploit them."

Ignorant judges! Head-in-the-sand judges!
They haven't a clue to what's going on.
And now everything's falling apart,
the world's coming unglued.

"I commissioned you judges, each one of you,
deputies of the High God,
But you've betrayed your commission
and now you're stripped of your rank, busted."

O God, give them their just deserts!
You've got the whole world in your hands!

What is interesting, is that when the poor and oppressed called out to God to judge them, they did not expect God to reward them with material benefits beyond those they were normally entitled to, in order to, lead a normal life.

When they sold their produce and services, they expected a fair deal.

Ownership of land and property, freedom and security, constituted their inalienable rights bestowed on them by God – their creator.

What this means is that when we read passages referring to justice of the poor, they really are talking about the rights of the poor.

Justice is really all about basic human rights.

God judges in order to restore the lost rights of the oppressed.
Psalms 76:9 (NIV)
God, rose up to judge, to save all the afflicted of the land.

God establishes justice in the world by eliminating inequalities.
Psalm 113:4-9 (The Message)

God is higher than anything and anyone,
outshining everything you can see in the skies.
Who can compare with God, our God,
so majestically enthroned,
Surveying his magnificent
heavens and earth?
He picks up the poor from out of the dirt,
rescues the wretched who've been thrown out with the trash,
Seats them among the honored guests,
a place of honor among the brightest and best.
He gives childless couples a family,
gives them joy as the parents of children.
Hallelujah!

God's justice aims at creating an egalitarian community in which all classes of people maintain their basic human rights.

In the prophet Micah, when he asks what God desires of us, the answer is interesting. The answer tells us that God does not call for sacrifice (at least not of an animal).

Micah 6:8
what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love
kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

It is not sacrifice of something outside of us which can be seen as a way of being in relationship with God. It is rather a yielding of life itself to God and God's Way → it is a call to repentance of the most radical sort.

What God requires is not the life of some thing → but rather the living of the person who stands before God.

And that is what is so hard!

We tend to understand Justice in the same three ways that the prophets did.

Probably the most common way we talk about justice is that first one.

We expect God to smite our enemies!

We expect things to go our way because we are God 's favorites → God's chosen ones

We call this retributive justice.

If somebody hurts us, or harms us, we EXPECT God to take care of the problem.

This is one of the places that creates great controversy among different Christians groups.

Some will argue that this takes us out of the equation, that Justice is to be met out by God alone.

Jesus seemed to suggest this when he tells us:

Matthew 5:38-45 (NRSV)

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' {39} But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; {40} and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; {41} and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. {42} Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you. {43} "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' {44} But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, {45} so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

Unfortunately, we often want to take justice into our own hands, and if God won't smite them, then maybe we need to do it ourselves.

And some justify our actions as if they are sanctioned by God.

The second understanding is one we all hope is true --- well sort of . . .

We want to believe that God's justice is fair --- or at least that it is fair to us.

There is a rather interesting book that just came out two weeks ago that is creating quite a stir. It is Rob Bell's newest book called LOVE WINS. Rob Bell is

the founding pastor of a large evangelical church in Grand Rapids, Michigan called Mars Hill.

I will no doubt preach on this book shortly, but as I was reading it this past week I was amazed how much he wrote applies to the issue of justice.

The book is about heaven and hell and as he puts it, "the fate of every person who ever lived."

The comment he makes over and over, that is unfortunately true, is that people who are "most concerned about others going to hell when they die seem less concerned with the hells on earth right now, while the people most concerned about the hells on earth right now seem the least concerned about the hell after death."

We are happy with God's judgment as long as God is judging others, and leaving us → who have so much → alone!

For many people, when they think of justice, they think of the third understanding, God's justice as it relates to the poor.

That is why we are so engaged in missions → because we know that God cares about all of God's people; whether they believe and live like us or not.

I have to admit, I have always been attracted to the challenging message of the prophets. Over the summer months, when I am not teaching DISCIPLE and WWE I like to take the opportunity and study in depth one of the books of the Bible, and more often than not → it is one of the prophets.

While I was in seminary, we were studying Amos, not the "famous Amos" of cookie fame, the Amos who preached to the Northern Kingdom of Israel in the 8th Century BCE.

Most seminarians are pretty idealistic, and I was no different, and we loved the message of Amos that was shared earlier → the speech in which God tells us that he finds no delight in the religious feasts, sacred offerings and solemn assemblies of Israel's worship. Instead, cried Amos: "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an everflowing stream."

We all looked forward to laying a little Amos on our first congregations.

The first time the church got all up in a bunch about the worship flowers, or whether communion should be taken in the pews or at the rail, or whether the Gloria Patri should be sung to the new tune, the old tune, or dropped from the service altogether. Then we would rise up in prophetic indignation and, in the deepest voices we could muster, we would lay a little Amos on them.

Well, as I recall,
 some did and soon left
 some did and soon learned
 and some chickened out and crucified their internal Amos, allowing no possibility of resurrection.

Truth be told, Amos never said: "Don't worship." What Amos said was: "If what you do is pure and lovely in here, yet stinks to high heaven out there, it ain't worship....it ain't right....and it ain't of God. So get with the program, which is about charity and community every bit as much as it is about liturgy."

So what would Amos say if he was the guest preacher here today?

I can imagine, but it wouldn't be pretty.

We live in a world of haves and have nots.

We fortunately for us, we are the haves.

But Amos, and God tells us we better not forget the have nots!

In his book, The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, Stephen Covey identifies "proactivity" as the key that unlocks the door of all the other good habits.

Proactivity makes the difference between success and failure.

Covey defines proactivity as being responsible for our choices and exercising our freedom to choose based on values rather than moods, tradition and conditions.

Proactivity is choosing to make deposits instead of withdrawals.

Jesus calls us to be proactive in doing good.

Make this your passion.

Don't let opportunities to do good pass by.

There is always something we can do to make the world a better place.

Two weeks ago, I told you that HUNGER is when we have a strong desire or craving.

Develop a craving for God's justice.

For a world in which no one goes to bed hungry.
A world in which no one is disenfranchised because of their race, language, or
place of birth.

Make it your passion!

Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.