

Justice for All

Image

Purpose

To help us embody the vision of justice that God announced through the servant



The Scripture for this lesson is Isaiah 41–42. Selected verses are printed below.

Listen

Isaiah 42:1-8

1 Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.

2 He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street;

3 a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice.

4 He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

5 Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it:

6 I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations,

7 to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.

8 I am the Lord, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols.

Key Verse: I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations. (Isaiah 42:6)

Look

Smoking is not permitted on commercial flights today, but it used to be. Airlines used to accommodate nonsmokers by designating blocks of seating as nonsmoking sections. It happened on one flight that a man seated in one of these sections lit up a cigar. A salesman leaned across the aisle and said, "I'm sorry, sir; but this is a no-smoking section. You can't smoke there."

The smoker looked straight ahead, ignoring the salesman; so the salesman appealed to the flight attendant. She spoke to the smoker, saying, "I'm sorry, sir; but you can't smoke here. There are some empty seats in the back. You can smoke there."

The man ignored her, too; so the attendant, in exasperation, went about her duties. Later, while beverages were being distributed, the plane hit some turbulent air just as the attendant got to the smoker. She stumbled, spilling an entire tray of beverages into his lap. At which point he said, "Don't tell me there is no justice. I have proof!"

When people "get what's coming to them," whether it be punishment for wrongdoing or reward for good behavior, we usually consider that justice. The Bible, however, means something quite different from just desserts when it speaks of justice. In this lesson we will learn about God's vision of justice and consider how we might employ our understanding of it in God's service.

Live

Isaiah 40–55 is the work of a different prophet from the one who wrote Isaiah 1–39. This second section of the book deals with a later time than that of the original Isaiah (sometimes designated as "Isaiah of Jerusalem"). Unidentified, the later prophet is often referred to as "Isaiah of Babylon" or "Second Isaiah." Isaiah of Jerusalem prophesied to the southern Jewish state, Judah, from 742 to 689 bc. Isaiah of Babylon began his ministry about 540 bc.

About 586 bc, the Babylonian army overran Judah's capital, Jerusalem, and deported many of its citizens to exile in Babylonia. Then, in 539 bc, the Persians conquered the Babylonians; and the Persian king, Cyrus, "stirred up" by the Lord (Ezra 1:1), offered the detainees an opportunity to return home. The prophecy of Isaiah of Babylon pertains to this time of opportunity. When King Cyrus extended to the exiled Jews the chance to return to their homeland, it was Isaiah of Babylon who explained that the ending of captivity was actually the work of God. Cyrus was merely the vehicle of God's liberating action.

Bible students have long referred to Isaiah 42:1-4, along with Isaiah 49:1-6, 50:4-9, and 52:13-53:12 as "Servant Songs" or "Songs of the Suffering Servant." All four pieces of poetry refer to an agent specially called by God to be in a role in which suffering is the price paid for doing God's will. This servant of the Lord is a highly idealized figure whose work is faithfully to extend justice to the nations. From the four passages we learn that the servant was chosen in the womb, had a universal mission to help both Israel and other

nations, and was a light bringing salvation to the ends of the earth.

In these four readings, the servant's identity is never mentioned. Bible students have suggested that the servant possibly was a prophet such as Moses, Jeremiah, or Second Isaiah; a Judean king such as Hezekiah, Uzziah, or Jehoiachin; the Persian king, Cyrus; or an ideal monarch-messiah. From the first century onward, the church often saw these Scripture-poems as referring to Jesus, especially in light of the suffering he endured. While that remains a valid way to read New Testament events back into the Old Testament, Isaiah of Babylon probably believed that the servant was the nation of Judah in exile (See Isaiah 41:8; 44:1.). In a broader sense, the name included all the descendants of the twelve sons of Jacob, including the remnant of the extinct northern Hebrew kingdom once called Israel.

When does personal suffering become an offering to God? What circumstances must be present for that to happen?

Redefining Justice

Our reading begins with God stating his pleasure in his chosen agent and stating the servant's task:

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. (Isaiah 42:1)

The Hebrew word interpreted as "justice" in this verse (and again in verse 3) is *mishpat*, and it is broad enough in definition that two separate but related ideas may be inferred from it. On the one hand, it has a judicial meaning of "judgment," which is how the King James Version translates the term. As noted above, the Bible rarely speaks of justice as "just desserts," for judgment as extended from God includes mercy. Because of God's mercy, only those who absolutely resist God's offer of forgiveness and restoration actually get what they truly deserve.

The more common, biblical meaning of *mishpat* is "true religion" or "righteousness." Virtually all modern versions of the Bible attempt to capture that meaning with the word justice. Thus, when God says that the servant "will bring forth justice to the nations," the image is not that of arriving with a fiery sword to slay wrongdoers but coming with the compassionate righteousness on which humankind depends.

In the Bible, justice is a corollary to righteousness, which pertains both to the character of God and to human conduct. In the context of the covenant relationship between God and Israel—and later, between God and the church—human righteousness is more than keeping a set of moral rules and going to church regularly. It is the obligation to love God and love one's neighbor. Righteous people work for the good of the community, showing special attention to those in need. One cannot be both self-focused and righteous, for the righteous person cares for the neighbor as diligently as he or she worships God. The righteous are those who bring good to the community; the wicked are those who do it harm.

Even God's righteousness is revealed in relationship to the community. God is the one who intervenes in history to restore the well-being of the community; God's works of intervention are what the Bible calls "the triumphs of the Lord" (Judges 5:11) and "saving deeds" (1 Samuel 12:7).

From the biblical point of view, “righteous” and “wicked” can also be translated “innocent” and “guilty,” which are also judicial terms. Psalm 1, which speaks to both the righteous and the wicked, links each to an appropriate destiny: “For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, / but the way of the wicked will perish” (Psalm 1:6). The prophet Ezekiel filled in what the psalmist left out, that it is God’s will that no one should perish: “For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God. Turn, then, and live” (Ezekiel 18:32). God’s justice is laced with mercy and opportunity for restoration.

Regardless of the servant’s identity in the days of Isaiah of Babylon, there is no question but what the early Christians saw Jesus as God’s servant. Matthew applied this Servant Song directly to Jesus (Matthew 12:18-21). Peter called Jesus God’s servant (Acts 3:13). God affirmed Jesus in language reminiscent of Isaiah 42:1 at both Jesus’ baptism and his transfiguration (Matthew 3:17 and 17:5). For the first Christians, Jesus was the servant who brought justice to the nations. After Pentecost, they came to see themselves as the ones called to carry out that work of justice. Thus many believers, including Paul (Romans 1:1), Peter (2 Peter 1:1), James (James 1:1), Jude (Jude 1), and John of Patmos (Revelation 1:1) referred to themselves as “servants” of Jesus.

As followers of Jesus, we are the ones who are to do justice today, working for the well-being of the community, especially those at the bottom of the economic ladder. There are many people who put their faith into action by giving money. Some help by pitching in with a hands-on effort. Some work for God’s justice by speaking up for those on the margins of society. Some help in other ways. Whenever, out of our devotion to God, we care for the well-being of others, we are being righteous.

Biblical justice is not winning a judgment or putting things back as they were before some bad thing happened. It is not “getting even” or seeing someone punished for wrongs committed. It is not even getting a well-deserved reward. Biblical justice is righteous living that takes seriously loving God and loving one’s neighbor.

Who is crying for justice in your community?

Living Justice

Our printed Scripture reading stops with Isaiah 42:8, but the hymn actually runs through verse 9. These verses are assumed to be a hymn because they have a unified theme. That theme is praise of God as creator of the cosmos. The hymn views the creation as an orderly, harmonious whole. The same Creator-God “who created the heavens and stretched them out” also “spread out the earth and what comes from it” (Isaiah 42:5).

Although the hymn is a separate piece of composition from the preceding Servant Song, it elaborates on the theme of the servant’s mission. God, who is the creator of the heavens and the earth, has called Israel “in righteousness” and sent it to be “a light to the nations” (Isaiah 42:6). When the infant Jesus was presented in the Temple, a righteous man named Simeon saw the baby Jesus. The Holy Spirit enabled Simeon to see that the baby was to be the means of salvation for both Israel and the Gentiles. Moved by the Spirit, Simeon paraphrased verse 6 from this hymn and applied it to the infant (Luke 2:25-35).

The hymn also tells that the servant is called and empowered to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. (Isaiah 42:7)

Each of these actions is an embodiment of justice.

One person who takes the biblical call for justice seriously is Robin Hoover, pastor of First Christian Church in Tucson, Arizona. A few years ago he learned that after the U.S. Border Patrol closed down some of the town routes that undocumented migrants had been using to cross from Mexico into the United States, border crossers began taking their chances on remote desert routes. As a result, more migrants were dying of hypothermia and dehydration. When their bodies were found, some were laying beside holes they had dug desperately trying to find water. Border officials had hoped the desert would deter the immigrants; instead, it led to more deaths.

Hoover chose to do something about the problem. He and a group he leads called Humane Borders started putting sixty-gallon water tanks near the paths the border crossers were using. Hoover and his group painted the barrels blue, put the word agua (Spanish for "water") on the side, and erected thirty-foot flagpoles nearby with a blue flag on them so the migrants could locate them. The Humane Borders members, all volunteers, make sure the tanks are filled regularly. In the first year of operation, the group replenished five thousand gallons of water. Although Hoover and his coworkers believe the current militarized immigration policy is wrong, their work is not to fight the border personnel but to save lives. In April 2002, for example, agents arrested a group of thirty-three people in the desert, all of whom reported that they had survived by stopping at one of the water stations.¹

Being righteous is not simply being morally straight or knowing the Bible or feeling the Spirit. It is loving God and loving neighbor. It is embodying justice.

What groups of people are omitted from the care of your community? What can you do about this?

O God, open our eyes and our hearts and our imaginations that we may do justice and live righteously. Help us to embody the vision of justice that you announced through the servant and showed in the life of your Son. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

¹ From "A Thirst for Justice," by Tim Steller, in *Mother Jones*, July–August 2002; page 19.