



Sermon Notes: Cameron Webber

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Justice Before Jesus in the Old Testament

Introduction

What's the best known verse in the Bible? John 3:16? 'For God so loved the world...' It always been in the ether, though less so now. And perhaps unless under 50s have been 'churched' or listened well in Scripture classes they will struggle to tell you a verse from the Bible as that sort of thing is no longer picked up by osmosis.

They may come up with a 'verse' such as the well-known '*God helps those who help themselves*' which is up there in the top 10 well-known verses. Of course the trouble is it's not in the Bible.

The idea was common in the ancient Greek tragedies and made famous by Benjamin Franklin and so, as has been observed, it's a mash-up of Aesop's fables and the great American Dream.

And not only is it not in the Bible, it's pretty much the opposite of what the Bible teaches, which is '*God helps those who cannot help themselves.*'

So many verses make that clear. Ephesians 2: 'We were dead in our transgressions and sins. We were by nature deserving of wrath. But God, who is rich in mercy, because of his great love with which he has loved us, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions - it is by grace you have been saved.' It was when we were helpless, (Romans 5) 'while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.' It's at the cross where God's justice and mercy meet.

The **Justice** of God. It's a big topic we're looking at over these 7 weeks with different possible emphases, various angles, and a lot of nuance. Though at the very least we can say that justice springs from the nature of God who is just. We heard read (Psalm 89:14) 'Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; love and faithfulness go before you.'

As Steve introduced it last week, the focus of the series is how we live out God's justice, that biblical justice which requires that every person be treated according to the same standards and with the same respect. And in particular that means paying attention to the vulnerable, the oppressed. As we heard in the reading from Deuteronomy (24:17), 'Do not deprive the foreigner or the fatherless of justice, or take the cloak of the widow as a pledge.' That's those who in that time and culture were particularly vulnerable to being taken advantage of or being oppressed and they are singled out repeatedly throughout the Old Testament as being worthy of special mention because they were less likely to be given a fair go, to receive justice.

The God whose love is for everyone has, in both the Old and New Testaments, a particular concern for those on the margins of society. Maybe that's a paradox, a tension, but we need but hold it and live it out.

Today we focus on **Justice in the OT** so let's pray.

Prayer

1. The Reason for Doing Justice

What is **the reason for 'doing justice'**? At the most basic level, the reason is that **God commands it.**

It's there again and again in the Old Testament; in the law and the prophets, in the narrative, in the poetry, and the proverbs. There are a number of Old Testament verses in the parallel Bible Study notes to read and consider, but focussing on what we read from Deuteronomy...

24:13 'Return the cloak [taken as a pledge for a loan] by sunset so that your neighbour may sleep in it. Then they will thank you, and it will be regarded as a righteous act in the sight of the LORD your God.' It's a simple act, and we are told it is a righteous act, or we could equally say, a just act.

Or 24:15 'Pay [your workers] their wages each day before sunset, because they are poor and are counting on it. Otherwise they may cry to the LORD against you, and you will be guilty of sin.' Do what is fair, right and just - if not we are guilty of sin. The traditional prayer of confession acknowledges, "We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; And we have done those things which we ought not to have done."

We are to do justice, because God commands it, but how easily by action or inaction we (24:17) deprive the foreigner, or the fatherless, or the widow, of justice.'

The reason for doing justice? It is the command of God and we should simply obey the command of God.

2. Further Rationales for Justice

But we are given **further rationales** as to why God would command this. In 24:18b and 22 the Israelites are told, 'Remember that you were slaves in Egypt. That is why I command you to do this.'

Collectively they had been in the position of marginalisation, vulnerability, of no justice, when they were slaves. And if they remember that, then they can put themselves in others' shoes, and with empathy, seek a fair go for those not getting it.

And as we do that, as we do justice, (24:19) 'the LORD will bless you in all the works of your hands.' The rest of the Bible – Old and New Testaments – urge us not to take a simplistic cause and effect view of God's blessing. Read Job if you have any doubts about that. Certainly we are blessed spiritually as we obey God and to the extent that we receive any physical blessing, surely we are blessed so we can be a blessing to others, and that includes doing justice.

3. The Reach of Justice

Who do we seek justice for? How far should our **justice reach**?

In Deuteronomy 24:10 we see justice for the neighbour (literally and generally) and in verse 12 for the poor neighbour in particular. (We will be considering the obvious 'who is my neighbour?' passage in a couple of weeks.)

And justice must extend (24:14) to 'your hired workers' (who are poor) whether they are from your tribe or not – the Israelite and foreigner.

Repeatedly we are told of 'the foreigner, the fatherless, the widow' who, as we have already noted, are representative of the marginalised of society. (Deuteronomy 24:17, 19, 20 21)

And as we move into chapter 25 we see that justice is to be in the judicial system. The innocent are to be acquitted and the guilty condemned, and so there is no place for playing favourites or receiving bribes. Justice must be done. And whilst the beatings and floggings of verses 2 and 3 sound harsh, don't miss that the emphasis is that punishment is to be proportionate and that there are limits. Punishment is not to degrade. And even the way judge has to be present as the punishment he has determined is given, serves as a way to keep it proportionate and perhaps even with a tinge of mercy.

The question of 'reach' raises the unique situation of Israel as the Old Testament 'People of God.' They were a theocratic geo-political nation-state in covenant with God. No equivalent exists since Jesus. The 'People of God' is now the church worldwide. So how do we apply the Old Testament principles of justice in the church (as God's New Covenant people) and can we apply them to our nation (or the nations)?

It is important that we don't confuse Australia with Israel but it is worth noting that the Old Testament prophets did call other nations to act justly (eg Amos 1) so the church as God's People can have a prophetic voice to those who are not God's People and strive for justice and fairness and for the marginalised beyond the church. In our democratic society, we have the right to make our feelings known – indeed a responsibility to be a voice for those who have no voice.

Our reach can start right where we are – with our neighbours. With Christmas rapidly approaching we have opportunity to help bring justice and fairness in simple ways through things like the Christmas Hampers. Through our giving, (of money and time), through action, through our prayers, we are to be agents of justice when and where we can, both locally and further afield, and ultimately the reach for social justice, is the same as the reach of gospel mission, that we spoke about a couple of weeks ago, and that is 'the ends of earth.'

4. **Routine and Radical Justice**

And if that's to happen we need to build justice into our **routines**. And we see that in the Gleaning-Laws in Deuteronomy 24:19-22 and other places. Leave the grain around the edge of the paddock for those doing it tough – give them a fair go. (Leviticus 23:22)

If we own a business and are seeking to gain an income, we don't need to claw in every cent at the expense of fairness. If we are on someone else's payroll, then we don't need to hold on to every cent and hoard it for ourselves. Build justice in to the way we make our money and the way we use our money. Every good and perfect gift comes from God our Father and we are to receive them thankfully. And in doing so it is always worth asking ourselves, 'Does the way I'm using my money and possessions and time reflect the fact that Jesus is my Lord?'

Giving money and even praying for justice are perhaps easier than giving our time and friendship to those on the edge. It can be 'tricky' but we mustn't shy away from actually doing it, not only routinely but even **radically**.

The **Radical** Jubilee Year took the Sabbath principles of every seven years and put them on steroids... the return of property to original owners every 50 years. What does that look like in our place and time? There's opportunity for discussion around that in your groups in the study.

When you have sorted it out, let me know! The challenge is always there before us: Do justice - routinely and radically!

5. The Result of Justice

So what is the **result** of doing justice, of helping the marginalised, of working for a fair go? Deuteronomy 15 is another Old Testament chapter worth looking on this topic and it tells us (15:4) 'there need be no poor people among you.' That's a big call, and it seems to roll it back just a few verses later: (15:7) 'If anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites...' There needn't be any, but there might be some and by verse 11 we are told, 'There will always be poor people in the land.'

We live in a fallen world and things are not perfect, despite our best efforts. There will always be injustice, but rather than throw our hands in the air and say it's all too hard, we are to keep working for justice and fairness and being generous. In fact that's what Deuteronomy 15 goes on to say... (15:11) 'There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be open-handed towards your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land.'

That's part of the way that Israel was to be a light to the nations, and as we, the church, follow the same instruction, people should see how we treat each other and how we treat the marginalised of society, and we pray they will see our good deeds and glorify our Father in heaven. And we pray that we will not only make a difference in the lives of those whom we seek justice for, but that it will build a bridge to them and to those who see what we do for them - a bridge for the good news of Jesus and his justice and mercy and grace to be carried over.

6. The Reinforcement of Justice

Justice before Jesus in the Old Testament – a big topic we have hardly scratched the surface of. The command is there and it applies to us, and without pre-empting next Sunday too much, we will see when we look at Justice and Jesus in the New Testament that we are not let off the hook. If anything, the message of Justice is **reinforced** and even ramped up.

Jesus, our Saviour who in his humiliation was deprived of justice (Acts 8:32-33) tells us, 'Don't neglect justice.' (see Matthew 23:23) And James was later to write (1:27) 'Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to come to a nice church service and enjoy morning tea afterwards???' No! 'Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress' - do justice, care for the marginalised – 'and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.'

Conclusion

And don't shy away from it with a false dichotomy between 'social justice' and 'gospel.' Don Carson says, "The gospel not only reconciles us to God, but transforms us, and that necessarily shapes our behaviour, priorities, values, relationships with people, and much more. These are not optional extras for the extremely sanctified, but entailments of the gospel.'

And Tim Keller (p 40) says, "Grace is the key to it all. It is not our lavish good deeds that procure salvation, but God's lavish love and mercy. That is why the poor are as acceptable before God as the rich. It is the generosity of God, the freeness of his salvation, that lays the foundation for the society of justice for all. ... God's concern for justice permeated every part of Israel's life. It should also permeate our lives." How is it permeating yours?

Prayer