

Micah 6:8 (NIV, NRSV)

⁸He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.
And what does the LORD require of you?
To do justice, and to love mercy,
and to walk humbly with your God.

Jeremiah 7:1–7, 11 (NIV)

This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: ²“Stand at the gate of the LORD’s house and there proclaim this message:

“Hear the word of the LORD, all you people of Judah who come through these gates to worship the LORD. ³This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this place. ⁴Do not trust in deceptive words and say, “This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD!” ⁵If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, ⁶if you do not oppress the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, ⁷then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your ancestors for ever and ever. . . . Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching! declares the Lord.

Mark 11:15–17 (NIV)

¹⁵On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple courts and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, ¹⁶and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. ¹⁷And as he taught them, he said, “Is it not written: ‘My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations’? But you have made it ‘a den of robbers.’”

It seems so straight-forward: Do justice. But do we?

What does God require of us? Simply this: that we would do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8). These three simple phrases give shape to the sort of life God would have us lead and the choices God would have us make. Though the three phrases make a unified whole, each of them is built on a very important biblical word. This week we’ll explore the first of them: “justice” (*mispat* in the Hebrew). Here’s a sampling of some notable Old Testament passages on justice:

⁶But you must return to your God;
maintain love and **justice**,
and wait for your God always.
Hosea 12:6

²¹“I hate, I despise your religious festivals;
your assemblies are a stench to me.

²²Even though you bring me burnt offerings
and grain offerings,
I will not accept them.

Though you bring choice fellowship offerings,
I will have no regard for them.

²³Away with the noise of your songs!
I will not listen to the music of your
harps.

²⁴But let **justice** roll on like a river,
righteousness like a never-failing stream
Amos 5:21–24

¹⁶Wash and make yourselves clean.
Take your evil deeds out of my sight;
stop doing wrong.

¹⁷Learn to do right; seek **justice**.
Defend the oppressed.

Take up the cause of the fatherless;
plead the case of the widow.

Isaiah 1:16–17

²⁴but let the one who boasts boast about this:
that they have the understanding to
know me,

that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness,
justice and righteousness on earth,
for in these I delight,”

declares the LORD.
Jeremiah 9:24

Justice

I don't think we often speak of "doing" justice, but the simple verb "do" captures the biblical meaning perfectly. In Scripture, "justice" is something we do, it is an action. It is never merely taking note of inequities or wrong. It is doing something about them. When we see a person being wronged by another, it is never enough simply to note the wrong, sigh in sympathy, and move on. "Doing justice" is correcting that wrong. Further, across the biblical story, justice is particularly about looking after the interests of those who cannot look after their own: the poor, the immigrant, the widows, and orphans. The biblical view is that the rich and powerful can do a pretty fine job looking after themselves; the poor cannot.

The importance to God of our doing justice is seen in the dramatic stories of two men: the prophet Jeremiah and the Christ, Jesus.

Jeremiah

About six centuries before Jesus, the prophet Jeremiah makes his way to the Temple gate. There, he stands in front of the massive doors and confronts his fellow Israelites. God's people have driven themselves over a cliff and now there is no turning back. It is too late; it is a "done deal" (see Jeremiah 4:28 for example). They have passed the point of no return. The "ifs" of Jeremiah 7:5-7 are not about righting the ship or drawing back from the brink, as was the case in other times. Instead, Jeremiah drives home the point that the time of reckoning has come. The "ifs," the warnings, proved fruitless before and now the poison fruit that the people have grown is about to be their undoing. They have not done justice and now they would reap the consequences. A few decades after Jeremiah's pronouncement, the Babylonian Empire rolls over Jerusalem, exiles tens of thousands of Jews, and destroys the majestic temple built by Solomon.

Why did this happen? Certainly, the biblical view is that it was God's judgment, a verdict rendered and carried out. A fair verdict, a just verdict. The people grasped that it was their own sin that was their undoing; yes, they had abandoned God and, yes, they had failed to do justice.

Jesus

If we go forward six centuries from Jeremiah, we again find a prophet charging into the Temple pronouncing God's judgment. But this time the prophet's name is Jesus. And as with Jeremiah, a few decades after Jesus' pronouncement, the Roman Empire rolls over Jerusalem, kills hundreds of thousands of Jews, and destroys the majestic temple built by Herod the Great. Seventy years after that, the Romans finish the job, clearing the Jews out of the area and erasing the Roman province of Judea from their geography books.

Many people don't grasp what it really means when Jesus invokes the words and actions of Jeremiah at the temple in Jerusalem. They forget that when the disciples are gawking at the magnificence of the temple, Jesus tells them that the giant stones were going to be thrown down (Mark 13:1-2; Mt. 24:1-3; Lk 21:5-7). If you visit Jerusalem today, you can see the giant cut stones that were levered off the temple mount by the Romans in 70AD. They still sit on the sidewalks below, right where they fell. (For more on Jesus' actions in the Temple, see the accompanying textbox).

For many people, the Babylonian exile and the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans conjures up images of a God who looks for every transgression, great and small, and then smites the offender – judge, jury, and warden all rolled into one. But what does the Bible really say about judgment and punishment? Is it truly God's retribution, i.e. a smiting?

In a word . . . no. There is, instead, a moral causality in God's creation, a moral fabric in which actions have consequences, just as they do in the physical world. Sadly, sin is quite real and leads to often horrifying consequences. We see this in our lives all too

often. Sometimes we say “what goes around, comes around” or “we reap what we sow.” Abuse others and you’ll find yourself abused. Treat others with kindness and you’ll find that it too boomerangs back to you. These commonplace observations about life get us close to what the Bible teaches about God’s judgment and the “punishment” that ensues.

We, of course, ask where God is as we suffer the consequences of our wrongful actions, as we plunge over the cliff. We sometimes make the mistake of thinking that God promises to insulate us from all the troubles of life, those of our making and those that are not. But this is not God’s promise. However, God does promise us *restoration* after the fall. God does promise that he will never abandon us.

It isn’t that God is always waiting to catch us when we fall; it is truer to say that God is always ready to restore us after the fall. The choices we and others make every day are often destructive and carry terrible consequences. Sometimes those choices are seen in the actions we take; in others, they are seen in our inaction and the blind eye we turn to those we could help. Just as Jeremiah forthrightly tells the people of the destruction and exile that lie ahead, he also brings them messages of hope and restoration. Yes, they are going over the cliff and the crash at the bottom will be terrifying, but God will still be with them and will bring them new life and new hope even in exile. (See Jeremiah 30 for some of these promises.)

*And so we are called still “to let justice roll on like a river,
righteousness like a never-failing stream.” (Amos 5:24)*

Den of Robbers = Cave of Brigands?

In his commentary, *Mark for Everyone*, Tom (N.T.) Wright helps us to understand what Jeremiah and Jesus meant by calling the temple a “den of robbers” (NIV).

. . . Although God had promised to bless Israel through the Temple, if Israel began to take it for granted, to use the Temple and the promises attached to it as an excuse for immoral and unjust behavior, then the Temple itself could and would be judged. That’s what the early chapters of Jeremiah are all about, including the quotation that comes here: God’s house has become a brigand’s cave.

In what sense was it a brigand’s cave? Not in the sense that people were using it to make money on the side. The word ‘brigand’, in Jesus’ day, wasn’t a word for ‘thief’ or ‘robber’ in the ordinary sense, but for the revolutionaries, those we today would call the ultra-orthodox, plotting and ready to use violence to bring about their nationalist dreams.

Part of Jesus’ charge against his fellow Jews was that Israel as a whole had used its vocation, to be the light of the world, as an excuse for a hard, narrow, nationalist piety and politics in which the rest of the world was to be, not enlightened, but condemned. We can see something of this attitude both in the Dead Sea Scrolls and in the tendency to violent revolution throughout the period in which Jesus lived. The Temple had been intended to symbolize God’s dwelling with Israel for the sake of the world; the way Jesus’ contemporaries had organized things, it had come to symbolize not God’s welcome to the nations but God’s exclusion of them. The holy brigands who were bent on violent rebellion against Rome—which in Jesus’ view was exactly the wrong way to bring about the kingdom of God—looked to the Temple as the central focus of their ideology. And the guardians of the Temple itself were notorious for their rich and oppressive lifestyle. Violence towards outsiders; injustice towards Israel itself; that was what the Temple had come to mean. As with the fig tree, Jesus’ only word for the place was one of judgment.

How did his actions in the Temple mean that? The purpose of the Temple was to be the place of sacrifice. Hour by hour worshippers came to the Temple, changed money into the official coinage, bought animals that were guaranteed perfect for sacrifice (if you brought an animal from some distance, there was a good chance it might be attacked on the way and so no longer be a perfect specimen, able to be sacrificed), and brought them to the priests who completed the killing and offering. The sacrificial system, and with it the reason for the Temple’s existence, depended on money-changing and animal purchase. By stopping the entire process, even just for a short but deeply symbolic moment, Jesus was saying, more powerfully than any words could express: the Temple is under God’s judgment. Its reason for existing is being taken away.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. What does it mean for us to “do justice” in our world today, in our communities, our workplaces, our homes, our churches? What are some specific ways that we fail to do so? Where could you do better? What injustices do we fail to really see?
2. Here’s the idea: sin (all the ways we fail to love God and neighbor) leads to judgment (the consequences of those bad choices), from which God rescues us and restores, though, often, only after we’ve thrust ourselves over the cliff. What in this sequence makes sense to you? What does not? How well does it match up with what you’ve always thought the Bible teaches? With what you believe Jesus taught?

Daily Bible Readings

This week: The fuller passages from the prophets on justice

Monday, Isaiah 1:10-31 Israel’s hands are filled with blood, but God will restore Zion.

Tuesday, Hosea 12 God levels the charges against Judea

Wednesday, Amos 5:18-27 One study Bible calls this passage “a statement of divine disgust.”

Thursday, Jeremiah 8:22-9:25 What is God to do with his people?

Friday, Zechariah 8:14-23 God is going to bring good to his people and reminds them of how they should live.

Saturday, John 2:13-23 John's account of Jesus' confrontation in the temple.

Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own.

This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Monday Evening Class

We are studying the book of Exodus.

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying the story of Esther.

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

Scott's 10:50 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Our current series: *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: The Kings of Israel*