

The Biblical Foundations of Justice

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the Law of Moses clearly indicates how the Israelite community should treat those who are poor and defenseless.

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not be so thorough that you reap the field to its very edge, nor shall you glean the stray ears of grain. Likewise, you shall not pick your vineyard bare, nor gather up the grapes that have fallen. These things you shall leave for the poor and the alien. (Leviticus 19:9–10, cf. Deuteronomy 24:19–22)

If you lend money to one of your poor neighbors among my people, you shall not act like an extortioner toward him by demanding interest from him. If you take your neighbor's cloak as a pledge, you shall return it to him before sunset; for this cloak of his is the only covering he has for his body. What else has he to sleep in? (Exodus 22:24–26, cf. Deuteronomy 24:10–15)

Either explicitly or implicitly, the operating terms in these and other related passages are *mishpat* and *tsedaqah*, generally translated “justice” and “righteousness.” Together, *mishpat* and *tsedaqah* connote a sense of communal peace and harmony, virtues that were supposed to characterize the Israelite people's relationship with God and with one another. In modern language, *justice* and *righteousness* mean “avoiding violence, fraud, or any other actions that undermine communal life, while at the same time ‘pursuing that which sustains the life of the community.’”¹

The Hebrew Scriptures not only describe how people should live in relation with one another but also demonstrate what happens when justice and righteousness are lacking. Numerous prophets, including Amos and Micah, unequivocally convey God's displeasure toward the wealthy and ruling elite who shamelessly exploit the “lower classes” of Israelite society:

Hear this, you who trample upon the needy and destroy the poor of the land!

“When will the new moon be over,” you ask,

“that we may sell our grain,

and the sabbath, that we may display the wheat?

We will diminish the ephah,

add to the shekel,

and fix our scales for cheating!

We will buy the lowly man for silver,

and the poor man for a pair of sandals;

even the refuse of the wheat we will sell!”

The LORD has sworn by the pride of Jacob:



Never will I forget a thing they have done!

(Amos 8:4–7)

Woe to those who plan iniquity,
and work out evil on their couches;
In the morning light they accomplish it
when it lies within their power.
They covet fields, and seize them;
houses, and they take them;
They cheat an owner of his house,
a man of his inheritance.

Therefore thus says the LORD:

Behold, I am planning against this race an evil
from which you shall not withdraw your necks.

(Micah 2:1–3)

Through these and numerous other prophetic passages, the Hebrew Scriptures clearly teach that God expects the people to act justly in their relations with one another. For the Israelite community as well as for us today, practicing justice is an essential characteristic of anyone who claims membership in the “People of God.”

In the New Testament, Jesus also offers many teachings that deal directly with how people are to live in right relationship with both God and one another. From Luke’s Gospel, he begins his public ministry by quoting the prophet Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring glad tidings to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,



and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.

(Luke 4:18–19; cf. Isaiah 61:1–2).

From the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus identifies himself with the outcasts of society, a theme that recurs throughout each of the Gospels. He ministers to and heals the poor, the blind, the lame, and sinners, and calls on his followers to do the same (see Luke 14:12–14,21). He teaches his disciples to model their lives on the Beatitudes (see Matthew 5:3–12 and Luke 6:20–26), to give alms to the poor (see Matthew 6:2), and to always act toward others as they would have others act toward them (see 7:12). Through the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37), Jesus further demonstrates how his followers should be willing to help a neighbor in need. He teaches forgiveness through the Parable of the Prodigal Son (see Luke 15:11–32) and the story of the woman caught in adultery (see John 8:1–11). And finally, he shows the importance of service to others through the washing of his disciples' feet (see John 13:1–20).

On a more negative note, Jesus warns against the trappings of wealth and power in his interaction with the rich young man (see Matthew 19:16–30, Mark 10:17–22) and his denunciation of the Pharisees and scribes (see Matthew 23:1–11). Similar stark warnings against both the lure and effect of riches are seen in the Parable of the Rich Fool (see Luke 12:13–21), the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (see 16:19–31), and in his teaching that “it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God” (Luke 18:24–25, cf. Mark 10:23–25). Through the Parable of the Talents (see Matthew 25:14–30), Jesus admonishes his followers to be careful stewards of the gifts that God has entrusted to them, and through the story of the Last Judgment (see Matthew 25:31–46), he warns his followers that their eternal fate will be determined, in part, on whether they aid their brothers and sisters in need.

These are but a few of the many passages from the Scriptures that deal with social relations, but in them we recognize two great values that have particular relevance for Christians today. The first, as we have already noted, is that faith is not simply a private affair between the Christian and God. Through the Law of Moses, the Israelite people's faith in God was translated into the various customs and regulations that both guided communal life and protected the dignity of society's most vulnerable members. The message of the New Testament is essentially the same. Jesus did not teach, heal, and forgive the many people he did simply because he was a nice guy; he did so to demonstrate his solidarity with the poor, powerless, and outcasts of society. This is the type of solidarity that his followers are called to exemplify in the world today.

The second value revealed through these scriptural passages is a vision of what we might term a contrast society. This contrast society is not one characterized by pride, greed, and the unrestrained pursuit of power; instead, it is one where people recognize that their individual goods are intertwined with the good of the community and that the needs of the poor and powerless become the “touchstone of right relationship with God.”² This vision is part and parcel of the Hebrew people's notion of communal living, and it is also implicit in Jesus' call, particularly through the Beatitudes, to live a countercultural life. Today, as in biblical times, we tend to measure worth by how much wealth one possesses or how much power one wields in society. The scriptural message demonstrates the exact opposite. True human worth rests with the fact that people are created in the image and likeness of God, and true human power is exercised through the practice of love, justice, and service.



Endnotes

1. John R. Donahue, SJ, "The Bible and Catholic Social Teaching: Will This Engagement Lead to Marriage?" in *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: Commentaries and Interpretations*, ed. Kenneth Himes, OFM, et. al. (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2004), 14. Donahue notes that the terms mishpat and tsedaqah, or variations of them, appear over nine hundred times in Scripture.
2. Ibid., 21. The two "great values" are taken from this text.

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