

Chapter 1



Biblical Foundations

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?

—*Micah 6:8*

Jim Wallis, a founder of the Sojourner Community in Washington, D.C., tells the story of having an intern cut out every reference to economic justice in a Bible. When Wallis later waved the Bible around during a sermon, it looked moth-eaten. He did the same exercise with another Bible, eliminating references to sexual morality, and the text appeared whole.

The Bible doesn't talk about everything. We don't get a straightforward guide for all of the world's problems, or even for all of our personal worries. However, there is no disputing the fact that the Bible has a lot to say about how we organize our society, how we use our material resources, and how we treat the poor and vulnerable.

Consider the wisdom of Proverbs: "Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker, but those who are kind to the needy honor

him” (14:31). Or look to the words of Jesus (read from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah), spoken as he began his public ministry:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
 because he has anointed me
 to bring good news to the poor.
 He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
 and recovery of sight to the blind,
 to let the oppressed go free,
 to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. (Luke 4:18–19)

From the book of Genesis, through the wisdom literature, the prophets, the Gospels, and the stories of the early church, the people of God wrestle with exactly what a just society requires and who is responsible for creating it. They may be conflicted, but when God is speaking, God’s values are clear. The God of the people of Israel, the God of Jesus, proclaims justice to the poor and outcast, proclaims the day of the Lord’s liberty to the debtor and prisoner, and expects the chosen people to create societies that reflect those values.

Justice in the Hebrew Bible

We know that from the beginning, in creation, all things are created to be in harmony. From the beginning, the striving, shame, and fear of human beings affects the rest of creation, from the Garden of Eden, through the Tower of Babel and the Flood story. The text tells us these human follies only draw God’s ire.

Until the **Hebrew people** were enslaved in Egypt, they were less a “people” and more a family, one that had the kinds of problems families have, like jealousy among siblings (Genesis 4 and 50) and favored children (Genesis 16 and 25). It is in enduring slavery together followed by the ordeal of the Exodus from Egypt that the children of Israel forge new bonds that make them a people, the Hebrew people.

They are nomadic for a time, and then they settle in a land called Canaan that had already been settled by others, their distant relations through Noah. For them, it is the Promised Land, literally promised by Yahweh. “I declare that I will bring you up out of the misery of Egypt, to the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, a land flowing with milk and honey” (Exodus 3:17).

When they settle in this new land, they begin to organize their community as the followers of the God who liberated them from slavery. God has now given them the Law as a guide for establishing their new nation, and among other things it includes strict instructions for how workers, debtors, and outsiders should be treated.

You shall not withhold the wages of poor and needy laborers, whether other Israelites or aliens who reside in your land in one of your towns. You shall pay them their wages daily before sunset, because they are poor and their livelihood depends on them; otherwise they might cry to the Lord against you, and you would incur guilt. (Deuteronomy 24:14–15)

If they are to be God’s people, then they are to live by a certain set of values: acknowledge dependence upon God and practice compassion for the poor, the foreigner, the wanderer, the slave, the widow, and the orphan. The text regularly repeats the litany of the outsiders and disenfranchised, calling Israel to resist what must have been a strong thread of inward-looking, defensive, protective identity that was likely forming in the now-settled nation of Israel.

If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be. . . . Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. Since there will never cease to be some in need on

the earth, I therefore command you, “Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.” (Deuteronomy 15:7–8, 10–11)

Because the Bible begins with the story of a nation, texts like this about social justice tend to be quite concrete. We may think of approaching God primarily in prayer and in worship. In the Bible, God seems less interested in how offerings are made and what words we use. Instead, justice is named as true worship, as the Prophet Isaiah reminds the recalcitrant children of Israel:

Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin? (Isaiah 58:6–7)

This is a challenging passage for Episcopalians. Many would say worship is our greatest strength; it is also the site at which we should be most vigilant in watching for betrayal and idolatry. The forces of sin that create injustice are persistent, and like Israel we too run the risk of celebrating beautiful yet meaningless worship.

Justice and Jesus

In the gospels we can point to Jesus’s teachings on justice, and they are many. Jesus not only defied the powers of the time in words; he challenged them in his very being. As a first-century Jewish peasant living under Roman occupation in Palestine, he defied local leadership and actively mocked the authority of the empire. Jesus is placed clearly in the lineage of the children of Israel, and he is born of a barely married young woman, in a family of modest means, on the outer fringes of the Roman Empire. The

list of Jesus's ancestors in the gospel of Luke features widows, prostitutes, kings, and shepherds.

In other words, he not only stands with oppressed people. He is one of the people, cruelly subjugated by acts of state violence like crucifixion.

What does it mean that God comes among us as one who is powerless and oppressed? Where should we look for God's action in the world? Jesus engages people from all parts of society and from diverse religious backgrounds, and in doing so he locates God's activity in the most unlikely places. He chooses his disciples from among the more modest members of his society and charges them with the all-important message of the reign of God's justice.

Finally, toward the close of his earthly ministry, Jesus offers a parable that appears to sum up the imperative to embrace those who suffer most, not only for their sake but also for our own salvation:

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." . . . And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." (Matthew 25:34–36, 40)

We have a God who speaks throughout the Bible on behalf of the oppressed, and in Jesus we have God among us, a Messiah revealed as one of the marginalized.

An Early Church Witness

In the letters of the early church, we see a community that is not just concerned about justice; they are a people without much social

influence. The early church lives in opposition to or invisible to larger society.

Within these small communities, we find the values of the Hebrew Scripture emerging again, but on a smaller scale. As James puts it: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world” (James 1:27).

The **Apostle Paul** has a famously mixed record on justice. He commends the leadership of numerous women in Christian communities, like the deacon Phoebe (Romans 16), but then he advises women to cover their heads (1 Corinthians 11:5) and hold their tongues in the community gathering (1 Corinthians 14:33–35). He tells slaves to obey their masters and trust that they will be rewarded on earth and in heaven (Ephesians 6:5–9 and Colossians 3:22). Then he offers a stirring call for equality in Christ in his letter to the Galatians:

[F]or in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:26–28)

Ultimately, our church teaches that the Scriptures that speak for justice and equality are paramount. Our church does not believe injustice is preordained. Our church does not teach that the way of the world is God’s way. We, as followers of Jesus, teach the opposite. We teach that the ways of the world are the ways of the powers and principalities. The ways of God are to be found among the margin dwellers and among the persecuted. They are to be found on the side roads and the edge of town, in the places where it is not safe to go because you might see something that causes you to question the way things are.

A friend from India who was not raised with a religious practice and is from the Dalit community, a group excluded from caste

identity in India and targeted for horrible abuse and discrimination, told me about the time he was given a Bible to read in his early twenties. He knew nothing about Christianity, so he read the Bible from the beginning to the end, as you would any other book. By the end he said he was in tears. He had never read a book so clear in its message of freedom and liberation for his community. He asked the friend who gave him the Bible if he could be baptized.

Scripture has the same transformative power for us all, including those who have been in church our whole lives, if we take it at its word.

TO PONDER

- 1.** Do you read the Bible in your personal practice? What role does it play as you make decisions about your life: how you spend money, how you choose your friends, how you understand your sexuality, etc.?
- 2.** What biblical mandates for the social order can you identify? Which ones apply to your life, and which do you think might apply to another community or time?
- 3.** Christians often disagree on what the Bible says about social issues. How do you think we should deal with those differences?