

Answer God's Call for Justice

SCOTT HOEZEE

In the Bible, the words for righteousness and justice are nearly identical in Hebrew and Greek. Righteous living and just living twirl around one another pretty freely; but in the reality of the modern Church, fierce debates are often held as to the Church's role in calls for public justice. So, what is justice? What is the Church's role in advocating for justice, and how does that apply to all that has happened in 2020, with COVID-19 and with the eruptions of calls for racial justice? We will think about these things today on *Groundwork*. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, this is now the fourth and final program in a very special four-part series we have done—very specific to the events of 2020 thus far, primarily the pandemic of COVID-19, but also, particularly for this show, the eruptions of protests calling for racial justice in the wake of some police killings of Black people in the United States, and the massive, massive protests, and the way the Church has gotten caught up in all of that—all of it brings to the forefront themes of justice. So, we thought about lament in this series, we thought about providence, we thought about what we learned about worship and the sacrament by not being able to worship together for a while this year when we were all in quarantine and lockdown; and now we want to think about another thing that has been prominent in our minds: Justice.

DAVE BAST

Right; and kind of the reason for this whole series is expressed in something Karl Barth...the great theologian Karl Barth...said many years ago; that preachers ought to approach their tasks with the Bible in one hand and the daily newspaper in the other; and if he were updating that for the 21st Century, he would say maybe your smart phone video feed or news feed in the other. The idea being that we don't just dig into scripture, we need to apply scripture and what it says to what is going on in our lives and in the world around us; and certainly, 2020 has been a year when our attention has been grabbed, to say the least, by what has been going on.

SCOTT HOEZEE

COVID-19—the coronavirus—revealed again, or magnified our ability to see social inequities and disparities that have been there all along. The economically poor, minority communities like African Americans and Native Americans...people who already are kind of on the margins and don't have resources like other people do. They suffered disproportionately and died disproportionately from the virus...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, the virus helped us see the social inequities that out there; and they have been out there, we just had it magnified for us by just seeing who got sick and who died and who didn't from the virus; and then, of course, things like the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis magnified again another issue that has been

out there, and that is Black people suffering disproportionately at the hands of the police enmeshed in systems that look and feel unjust; and what do we do to reform that? So, all of this has brought themes of justice to the forefront.

DAVE BAST

We saw days and even weeks of social unrest, of even rioting and looting, which almost everyone across the board condemned...no, that is not right either; but, these complex issues that have given rise to deep-seated, seemingly insoluble problems, and multiple things that are overlaid. So, underserved communities in terms of health services and hospitals, an over-prevalence of underlying health conditions that made the virus more deadly, lack of access to the services that many of us take for granted. You know, the whole thing has now come out into the open, and the question is, how do we respond? And we have said, okay, lament, but also let's look squarely at what the Bible says about justice.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And a lot of what the Bible says about justice is in the Old Testament and relates to ancient Israel; and we need to note up front that Israel was a unique society. They were a theocracy; they didn't have freedom of religion, they had an imposed religion: God was their ultimate king. No nation today is like that. Not Australia, not Canada, not the United States. We are not the equivalent of ancient Israel, and so you don't want to be too naïve and just sort of say: We will just take the blueprint from Israelite society and lay it over the top of the United States and then all will be well; you cannot quite do that, but there are principles that are very clear in the Old Testament related to Israel that will carry over into the New Testament, as we will see in the next segment, and those are the things that we do want to think about; and Dave, one principle that comes through in the Old Testament and continues into the New is the idea of the Year of Jubilee and what it signified.

DAVE BAST

Right; and what it signifies is nobody should be trapped in poverty forever.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

There should be no unending, hopeless kind of misery of an underclass, because the Year of Jubilee stipulated that every fiftieth year, a property that had been sold or people who had even been enslaved, needed to be freed; and so we read, for example, in Leviticus 25:

¹⁰Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land... (incidentally, "proclaim liberty throughout the land" is inscribed on the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia) to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you; each of you is to return to your family property and to your own clan. ¹³In this Year of Jubilee, everyone is to return to their own property. ¹⁴If you sell land to any of your own people, or buy land from them, do not take advantage of each other.

Ultimately, they had to give it back...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

It had to be restored. So, the underlying principle is no permanent slavery or poverty or underclass.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Bad things happen; people make bad decisions; you get your house or your property foreclosed upon, but every fifty years the economic clock was supposed to be reset. God does not like poverty; he did not want to see his people in poverty, and didn't want anybody to be impoverished forever. That is an important

economic principle. That doesn't mean that, you know, you can very quickly and easily devise economic policies for a nation today based on that, but it does say that economics and how people are treated, and how the Church, even today, needs to think about people who are permanently poor...well, that is something God doesn't desire. So, that is one important thing we get from the...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But the second one, Dave, is to do extra good for the vulnerable.

DAVE BAST

Yes; so, a passage, for example, like this from Exodus 22: ²¹Do not mistreat or oppress a foreigner, for you were foreigners in Egypt. ²²Do not take advantage of the widow or the fatherless. ²³If you do, and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry.

So, these were the people in the Old Testament who were especially vulnerable—the widow and the fatherless and the foreigner—because they didn't have the protection of the male members of their family; and those are the people, again and again and again throughout the Old Testament, that we see God is most concerned about, and he most wants those of us who have power, and those of us who have position in society, to care for them and care about them.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And take extra good care of them. Yes, the widow, the orphan and the alien within your gates...the immigrant, the foreigner...they come up again and again; but as we said, Dave, that is the Old Testament. That is Israel, which was a unique theocratic nation the likes of which does not exist anywhere in the world today; but are there things that did endure into the New Testament, and the answer is yes, and we will look at that in just a moment.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, where today we are trying to look squarely at the issue of justice—social justice—what God expects from us as a society, particularly those of us who claim to know him and follow him and love his book, the Bible; and we have seen what justice meant, especially in the Old Testament...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Concern for the vulnerable, the poor, the fatherless, the dispossessed...and that carries right through in the New Testament in Jesus' own example and teachings. So, we turn to Luke 4, where Jesus reads a passage from Isaiah 61, which says: ¹⁸"The Spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free; ¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (the Year of Jubilee)
And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to them and said, ^{21b} "Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, here is Jesus in his very first sermon in the synagogue of Nazareth, his home town...his very first sermon in Luke...and this is his passage, a Jubilee passage. So, we just said, Dave, that economically in ancient Israel God never wanted people to be poor in perpetuity, and he wanted us to spend extra care and attention on the most vulnerable, which in Israel was the widow, the orphan, and the stranger...the alien...the foreigner; but you might say, well, that was then. We live in the Church now. We are in the new Israel now,

except that here is Jesus appropriating the principles of Jubilee, taking extra care of the poor and the prisoners, and saying: That is who I am. This is fulfilled in your hearing. Now, of course, it wasn't quite literally fulfilled in their hearing. There were still vulnerable, poor people around, even after Jesus rose again from the dead and ascended back into heaven, but Jesus is certainly saying that in the kingdom of God, this part of it remains the blueprint. Take care of the poor, announce good news to those who don't have any, do what you can to help; live into and lean into the spirit of Jubilee.

DAVE BAST

Yes; now, of course, you will also hear Christians say: Well, Jesus is speaking spiritually here. He is talking about the spiritually poor, and he is talking about the release that comes from knowing him and having your sins forgiven; but, I think we need to say it is a both/and; yes, there is a spiritual application of this passage, but there is also a literal, physical one. We know that because of what else we read in the Gospels. So, for example, Mary's song in Luke 1, the *Magnificat* we call it. We have done *Groundwork* programs on this, but it is a wonderful expression of the same kind of attitude of looking at things from the standpoint of the poor, from the standpoint of the oppressed, as Mary sings.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and here is what Mary said: ⁵⁰“His mercy extends to those who fear him from generation to generation. ⁵¹He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. ⁵²He has brought down rulers from their thrones, but has lifted up the humble. ⁵³He has filled the hungry with good things, but has sent the rich away empty.”

So, that doesn't sound all spiritualized. That sounds like literally taking on the economic conditions that many people suffer under. So, here is Mary; she has just found out she is going to be the mother of the Son of God incarnate. She was just a little nobody living in the outback of the Roman Empire, and yet God tapped her for this big assignment; and it seems to have set off all these thoughts in Mary, like: If little old me can be important, maybe the little people everywhere are important. God is always lifting up the humble and putting down the proud, always scattering the rich but trying to take care of the poor. This is apparently who God is; and so, Dave, if that was sort of the preview of Jesus' ministry, if Jesus preached from a Jubilee text from Isaiah 61 for his very first sermon, no surprise that once Pentecost came and the Spirit was unleashed and the Church was formed, guess what?! They took care of each other.

DAVE BAST

Yes, absolutely. It wasn't just a spiritual thing in the early Church. In an earlier program in this series, we quoted from Acts Chapter 2, where the community of goods and property that was practiced in the earliest Church was highlighted. They helped each other out physically, materially, with their possessions and their money; but it also is repeated in Acts 6, in a passage like this. So [Acts 2:44-45] ^{Acts 2:44}All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. [and Acts 6:1-3] ^{Acts 6:1}In those days when the number of the disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. ²So, the twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the Word of God in order to wait on tables. ³Brothers and sisters, choose seven from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom.”

And they called them deacons, so there it is; they actually took a step to create a new form of ministry just to look after the physical needs of the members of the Church.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And widows in particular, right? So, there it is again. Widows were still vulnerable. Well, they are today, too, probably; but we said that in ancient Israel widows and orphans and aliens lacked any social safety nets, we might say today; and so you had to pay extra special attention to them. Well, here is the early Church all those centuries later, when ancient Israel really was no more, and widows rise to the top of the need list again. The whole idea of a diaconate—a ministry—was instigated because of the concern for taking good care of the vulnerable, starting with the widows.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and okay, to be honest, this didn't last apparently. It characterized the Church in the earliest days, but they moved on from there, it seems, and this was voluntary, as Peter says in Acts 5 to Ananias and Sapphira: You know, you had a choice in this matter; you didn't have to do this. So, now again with a very different society in which we live, where largely because of the teaching of the Church, social institutions gradually formed that would meet the needs of people. This is kind of an extension of the Christian faith; and maybe there is not as much pressure on local congregations as there was in the early days in Acts; but still, the principle is there.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Sure; if you read even secular people, or people who are skeptical of the Christian faith...people like Nicholas Kristof, who is a columnist for the New York Times...he is not really a believer, and he has had a lot of negative things to say about the Church in North America; but he travels the world and he says: You know, whenever I go places, if I find a hospital, if I find a hospice, if I find an orphanage, you know who founded all those things? Christians. The Church founded hospitals, not atheists...hospices, orphanages. So, when Nicholas Kristof sees Christians in other parts of the world working, he says: I think that is what they are all supposed to be doing. And indeed, that is true.

So, what we want to do as we close out both this program and this series, Dave, is wonder what does all this mean as we face the disparities—the social and economic disparities revealed by COVID-19—by police brutality against particularly people of color—what does that mean for the Church? We will try to ponder that in just a moment.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee. Dave, we said at the outset of this program that in the Bible, especially in the Greek New Testament, words for being a righteous person and words for being a just person are basically identical. Righteousness and justice go together. Being a follower of God, being a person of faith...you are a baptized believer who grows up to profess your faith in God, then that changes you, and you are supposed to sort of adopt God's mindset; and so, as we have been dealing in this special four-part series with issues that we have been facing because of the pandemic and because of the protests that have resulted from racial injustice, what does all of this biblical material about justice mean?

DAVE BAST

Well, let me start with that question of individuals...individual Christians...and start with myself. As we have seen the injustices exposed, what we call "systemic racism", maybe some are inclined to say, well, is that really a thing? Well, all that that means in practical terms is, life for a person of color, in the United States in particular, is very different from life for a white person. I read a wonderful line: Where you stand depends on where you sit. And if you sit in a place of privilege and power, you are going to take a different stand on issues than if you sit in a place of oppression or poverty or so on, So, for me, the first thing I want to do is refuse the temptation to deflect the uncomfortable questions that this raises; and you deflect them by saying: Well, what about this? What about that? Okay, that was horrible police brutality, but what about the riots? What about the...? Don't deflect it; just keep your focus where it is supposed to be; and I want to ask myself the question the disciples asked in the upper room. You remember, Scott, when Jesus said: One of you is going to betray me...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Eleven of them immediately said: Lord, is it I? We have a problem with racism in our culture...in our societies; and not just the United States. I want to begin as a Christian by saying, Lord, are you saying something to me? Do I need to change?

SCOTT HOEZEE

You can get lively arguments going in terms of what is the role of the institutional Church in this? Individual believers may be one thing, but what about the Church? Well, of course, let's state the obvious: The Church isn't supposed to replace government. The Church isn't supposed to take over and govern society. That is not the Church's role. That is not what we are called to do; nor should we, any of us individual believers or the Church, say: Well, we have read the Bible and so we have concluded there is just one Christian political party, and only one; or there is only one Christian economic policy to try to address this; or only one... No, you know, the Holy Spirit can move through us and inspire different ideas that Christians of equal good will might disagree on the best policies and so forth, but the core principle, Dave, is that we cannot look at racial injustice, revealed by COVID-19...revealed by police brutality...we cannot look at it as individuals or as a Church and ignore it...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We have the example of Jesus, we have the principles of Jubilee that were in Jesus' first sermon, as we saw on this program, to guide us; and so, what does that mean? What does it mean to bear witness? I think we can close out this program and this series with just a few observations. COVID-19 has reminded us that society just isn't fair...it isn't always fair. There are too many people who don't have access to doctors on a regular basis, which, as you said earlier, Dave, means they probably have some illnesses that wealthier people just get treated. They take blood pressure pills...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

They get their diabetes medication. Poorer people don't have health maintenance organizations that they are part of, and so when they get sick with COVID, they are much more likely to die of it; or some people live in such crowded conditions they cannot social distance even at home, right? They have been stuck together in close quarters. Followers of Jesus should lament this; and although we might have different ideas on how to reform health care and the like, the idea that we should say: Something has to be done...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That seems like an eminently Christlike thing to do.

DAVE BAST

And the great voices of justice in the Bible are the voices of the prophets in the Old Testament who were specifically called by God to say uncomfortable things to the powerful and the elite in their own societies, and it got them into a lot of trouble. The prophets were not popular. You know, when you want to be a popular preacher, don't go to the prophets...

SCOTT HOEZEE

No.

DAVE BAST

Because they aroused a lot of hostility. Some of them were imprisoned, some of them were beaten, some of them were even killed.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And the reason, Dave, is because Israel failed to live into God's spirit of Jubilee. We have no evidence the Year of Jubilee was ever actually observed in Israel. We have every evidence that the very thing God didn't want, endemic poverty from generation to generation, happened: the exploitation of widows and orphans. Instead of the extra care, they exploited them; and so the prophets had to say...like Amos and Micah: Amos 5:11^aYou levy a straw tax on the poor; you impose a tax on their grain. ^{12b}There are those who oppress the innocent and take bribes and deprive the poor of justice in the courts. ^{14a}Seek good and not evil that you may live. Then the Lord Almighty will be with you... ¹⁵Hate evil, love good; maintain justice in the courts. That was the message of the prophets.

DAVE BAST

Yes; or this, some famous verses from Amos, and also from Micah: Amos 5:24^aLet justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream. (And Micah) ^{6:8}He has shown you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And those quotes are so important, Dave, because the prophets were in a condemnatory mode. They had to tell Israel that they hadn't been doing it right; but those words of judgment were always followed by these more aspirational words of hope—a call to action—a call to justice. The way things have been do not have to remain. You know, in a time when economic and racial injustice and disparity have been so plainly on display, that is the call to God for his Church today...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The followers of Jesus...to do exactly these things for justice.

DAVE BAST

Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Dave Bast with Scott Hoezee, and we hope you will join us again next time as we continue to dig deeply into scripture as the foundation for our lives.

Connect with us at our website, groundworkonline.com, to share what *Groundwork* means to you, or to request other passages or topics for *Groundwork* to address.

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