

To Do Justice

DAVE BAST

Justice; it is a simple word with a complex meaning. The biblical prophets often talk about justice, yet today we tend to leave justice to our government. What does it mean for us as Christians to do justice in the course of our daily lives? Stay tuned.

BOB HEERSPINK

From ReFrame Media and Words of Hope, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Bob Heerspink.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast. Earlier this year the conservative radio commentator and host, Glenn Beck, made a comment that was really quite startling. He said to Christians: If your church talks about social justice, you should get out; because that is a buzz word, in his opinion, for political, left-wing activism; and that really struck me. I don't know if you noticed that comment, Bob, but you know, is that really a biblical attitude?

BOB HEERSPINK

You know, when he said that it seemed to me like he was just taking a huge piece of scripture and just pushing it off to one side. Now, I know we cannot politicize the Gospel, but to simply say that we shouldn't talk about social justice is really saying we shouldn't talk about a significant part of the Good News of Jesus.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and I realize that phrases can become clichés – they can become buzz words – and perhaps in some circles social justice has turned into that; but biblically speaking, if you are going to pay attention to God's word, if that is really our guide and our rule, we have to talk about justice because the Bible talks about it so much, both social and otherwise. In fact, one of the great themes, I think, of scripture is the way the prophets in the Old Testament in particular link God and worship of God and belief in God with morality, both personal and public morality.

BOB HEERSPINK

And that was such a new thing, actually...

DAVE BAST

Exactly, right.

BOB HEERSPINK

If you go back to the Old Testament prophets, the world around Israel was saying you've got religion in one corner, you've got morality in another, and they don't have any connection to each other at all.

DAVE BAST

Even today it is often the case. I remember an early visit I made to India, and we went to a shrine there that was dedicated to Kali, the goddess for whom Calcutta is made; and our Indian guide who was taking us there said: Well actually, all kinds of people come here. It is very popular with criminals and thieves...

BOB HEERSPINK

Really.

DAVE BAST

Because they will make an offering to the goddess because it is all about power and success; and that is really what ancient religion was like among Israel's neighbors. You made offerings to the gods in order to get from them what you wanted.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; it was a transaction.

DAVE BAST

Right.

BOB HEERSPINK

You gave them something; they gave you something.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and if they didn't come through, you tossed them out and tried another god.

BOB HEERSPINK

There was always another god or goddess out there that you could stake your claim to.

DAVE BAST

And that is what makes the Old Testament religion so profound and so significant, because this basic declaration is: I am the Lord; you must be holy because I am holy. A holy God who demands holiness, righteousness, justice from his people.

BOB HEERSPINK

The God of Israel is a God who has a moral character, and that is really something new on the history of the religious scene.

DAVE BAST

So, let's just take, for example, one of the great passages from the Old Testament; from the prophecy of Micah, Chapter 6. This is not only a great text about justice, but it is one of the greatest texts in all the Bible, where Micah says... he asks the question:

⁶With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? ⁷Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression; the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? So all these questions, you know, and it is all about worship and offerings...

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

And then here comes the punch line:

⁸He has told you, O man, 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?

BOB HEERSPINK

You know, I look at that passage, Dave, and he critiques worship there; and he describes worship that becomes more and more frenzied. We go from an offering of one calf to a thousand sacrifices to finally

something that was totally immoral and condemned in ancient Israel: child sacrifice...

DAVE BAST

Right.

BOB HEERSPINK

And he is basically saying: All those offerings mean nothing because there is something deeper that God is looking for from his people.

DAVE BAST

Well, as he goes through this catalogue, he mentions in the first place, sort of total dedication – burnt offerings; that is where you didn't even get to eat part of the offering; you just burned the whole thing; so it was an absolute sort of gift to God; and then he talks about valuable calves a year old. That was the most precious animal that you could offer because that is going to grow and produce and give you more cattle, so if you offer it up at a year... And then the quantity: rivers of oil; and finally, the ultimate, really, which was of course, as you say, illegal, but some did practice child sacrifices.

BOB HEERSPINK

It was being practiced in the pagan world around Israel.

DAVE BAST

And the idea was if you gave the most precious thing, the highest value that you could possibly have, your own child, you should expect back a big-time payoff from God; and the prophet just blows that all away and says: No; that is not what real worship is about. What God really wants is for you to do justice. There is the phrase: Do justice.

BOB HEERSPINK

And you know, we are going to talk about justice throughout this program and into the future, but just to think about worship today; people who really think that somehow if they worship God, or if they bring sacrifices to God, or if they make a big offering financially to God, they are going to get it back. The health and wealth gospel movement really is playing into an unhealthy understanding of what worship is really all about. Micah would come and say: look, your approach to worship, where you want this to be a transaction with God, is simply unacceptable.

DAVE BAST

Well, I think actually, that sort of attitude or approach has it exactly backwards. It says: okay, we give something to God and then we get something back from him. If you look at Micah closely or all of biblical faith, it is the other way around. First God gives us something and then we respond with our thanksgiving and our worship – our obedience.

BOB HEERSPINK

Even as we talk about justice in these programs, we have to recognize grace is first...

DAVE BAST

Right.

BOB HEERSPINK

It is first of all our relationship with God; a relationship established by God's grace that makes it possible for us to respond in a way that pleases him.

DAVE BAST

Well, here is another passage from Micah; in fact, these verses come just before the ones I read a moment ago: ⁴I brought you up from the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery... and therefore,

he says: what does God require? So, salvation comes first. The Exodus, you know, was not a jail break. It wasn't something that the people of Israel organized on their own. It was a pure act of God's redemption – of his salvation; and the biblical sort of movement of faith – of religion – is first receive from God this act of grace, which we do nothing to earn or deserve – and then give back to him what he does, in fact, require from us. It is a requirement. What does the Lord *require*, says the prophet, Micah? And that answer is, first and foremost, that we do justice.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; and that is really what we have to explore. To think about what is God asking us to do when he says act justly – live as just people? There are different ways of understanding justice. We really have to give a definition of that.

DAVE BAST

In fact, we think this is so important that we want to spend the next several weeks exploring different aspects of the concept of justice. Today, however, we focus in on the question: how do you *do* justice in Micah's terms? And to answer that, we have to define what justice is; but first, let's pause and talk about how listeners can join us in this conversation on our website.

BOB HEERSPINK

Listeners like you make *Groundwork* what it is. Our website, groundworkonline.com, is another way that we work to join you as you dig deeper into the scriptures. There, we continue to reflect on today's discussion about our world and the Bible, as well as many other conversations that listeners have begun about scripture and how it interacts with their lives. Plus, we look to you to help us think about upcoming programs. Finding us is easy. Just visit our website, groundworkonline.com.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

Bob, we are looking at the famous verse in Micah Chapter 6 that asks: what does the Lord require of you; and answers: to do justice. That is right off the bat; but in order to do justice, we have to answer the question: what is justice?

BOB HEERSPINK

You know, Dave, there is a certain sense in which people seem to have an innate sense of what justice is. That justice is fairness. There is a commercial on TV right now, which shows a little girl being offered a pony, and the gift that is given is a little toy pony; but then, to someone else, a live pony is given.

DAVE BAST

Yes, a real pony... I have seen that.

BOB HEERSPINK

And the little girl says: But that is not fair. In other words, that is unjust; and you know, this is a 6-year-old speaking.

DAVE BAST

Yes, exactly. Even moral relativists, you know... There is a big deal about, well, there is no absolute truth; there is no real standard out there; but when somebody cuts in front of a moral relativist in line their immediate reaction is the same: that is not fair.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

Justice is basic fairness. I read a really fine book recently by a Harvard professor named Michael Sandel called: *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?* And he quotes... he goes all the way back to the ancient philosopher, Aristotle, who defined justice as "giving people what they deserve," and you know, basic fairness; and then Sandel says this: A just society gives each person his or her due. The hard questions begin when we ask what people are due and why.

BOB HEERSPINK

Exactly. What do people deserve? And you know, I think that is answerable more easily when you talk about retributive justice when it comes to lawbreaking. People break the law; they should be punished. Amos, for example, in his prophecy talks about the lack of justice at the gate, and how there has to be justice in the law courts. Certainly, that is where justice has to begin in a society.

DAVE BAST

One of the cues that helps us recognize injustice is the sense of outrage that comes. We naturally respond when we see, for example, some notorious person doing some terrible thing and getting away with it.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

That is outrage – that triggers outrage; or in another sense... Recently, you know, the whole financial upheaval and the federal bailout of financial institutions – big banks and brokerage firms and all that; that was argued we had to do this in order to save our economy and keep us from going into depression and all the rest. Well, then it turns out that many of these same executives were given huge bonuses at the end of the year with the bailout money that the government gave them. Talk about outrage! It triggered it all the way from the halls of Congress and the White House down to the man on the street.

BOB HEERSPINK

And one of the things society struggles with is fairness in that kind of justice across all economic levels. It seems like it is so much easier to take advantage of someone who is poor, someone who is at a lower economic class, than someone who is at the top of the pyramid.

DAVE BAST

But then, I think we have to move on and probe a little further into the question of what is justice. It is pretty clear that justice means punishing wrong, and enforcing the law where the law is right and good and just we presume; but going back to that question: Giving people what they deserve; for Christians, I don't think it is enough to just say criminals deserve punishment. I think we have to push a little bit further into a different area – a different kind of justice. We might call it distributive justice. There is retributive justice, which means punishment of wrongdoers – giving them what they deserve; but what about people who lack the basic necessities of life? People who don't have enough food, who don't have decent housing?

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; and those issues really become a bigger struggle for society. Here in America today, discussing healthcare. Do people deserve healthcare? Is that a right? You know, what about other basic necessities of life? How far should society go to help those who are poor and dispossessed?

DAVE BAST

Well, just ask yourself this: Do people deserve to be born into a hopeless situation, where they can never really expect a fair shake in society? Maybe they are born without a father. We tend to blame the poor, you know; there is a certain attitude that says: Well, if they just worked hard enough; if they just got an education; but maybe they never had a real chance realistically speaking. Do we deserve to be born into comfortable circumstance – into middle class families – to having parents who cared for us, who read to us,

who sent us to good schools? You know, when you start to ask: what do people deserve? The questions get much tougher.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, I think that is where we really have to get back to our Christian grounding and say that the way in which we approach people – how we understand people – is going to factor into an answer. You know, if we as Christians say we are created in God's image. If that is who we are, then it would seem that every individual has a right – deserves to have the basics which would allow that person to unpack in their own lives what it means to be an image-bearer of God.

DAVE BAST

If you look at the Bible's definition of justice and description of justice, it often links justice with righteousness; and it argues, I think... it presents, let's say...not so much an argument but a vision of what a good society looks like; and it shows us a picture of a community, really...

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

Where there is flourishing for all people, where there is opportunity for all people. It talks about righteousness in the sense of what is right and what is good. If you are going to define justice in biblical terms, I think you cannot just limit yourself to saying: Well, you know, punish the wrongdoers and give me the freedom to achieve and to accomplish what I want, and don't take anything that is mine away from me. That is justice. No, that is not a biblical understanding of justice. A biblical understanding of justice is a community or a society where God's will is done; where God's righteousness is expressed in relationships.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; because God has created us to live in community. That is who we are. It is part of our very identity; and so this attitude that, well, as long as you don't get in my way I can do anything I want and I don't have to be concerned about you; that simply has no place on the pages of the prophets; in fact, they are always going up against that – the notion that we have a responsibility for our neighbor. You know, am I my brother's keeper? There is a true sense in which the answer is yes.

DAVE BAST

Social justice, in other words, is part of the Bible's vision. It is not just a buzz word, and this is not a political issue of left versus right. This is a biblical issue. If we care about obeying God's will as part of our response to his grace, then we are going to have to care about that.

BOB HEERSPINK

That is what we have to explore, I think, from a practical point of view. What really does that mean for our day-to-day lives?

Segment 3

BOB HEERSPINK

This is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Bob Heerspink.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast.

BOB HEERSPINK

So, Dave, we are talking about justice, and we are talking about God's heart for justice, and we need to share that. It has to come out in practical ways in the way in which we deal with everyday life. Justice isn't a political issue – social justice – it is a biblical issue, but it has to come out in, say, how we vote, how we

approach the issues that we face in the ballot box.

DAVE BAST

Well, what does the Lord require of you, asks the prophet? That is the text we have been wrestling with today, and it is a requirement. This is not an optional thing for Christians. If we believe in God, if we have received his grace in our lives, then there are certain demands that are placed upon us, and one of them is the demand, in Micah's terms, to do justice. So, we have explored a little bit about what justice is. It is not just punishing crime, but it is also trying to work toward a good society – a society where human beings have what human beings ought to have, which is a fair chance and a decent life – a reasonable life. The question is, how can an individual do that? Isn't it all too big for us?

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, I think the concept of the common good is really, I think, a healthy biblical concept. It means that we are creating a society together, and we have to think not just of ourselves, but of our neighbors.

DAVE BAST

Well, let's take that phrase: It's the economy, stupid. In other words, appeal narrowly to people's economic interest because that is what they are going to respond to. Well, frankly, Christians cannot do that; not if we are going to obey the word of God. We cannot just vote for our own economic interests. We have to ask a bigger question about what is just and what is needed? I was really encouraged a couple of months ago now. Many of the communities in our part of the state, in west Michigan where you and I live, voted for tax increases on a local level, for local government units; for schools, for infrastructure, for police and fire services. We are all facing these problems economically, and people said...the majority at least of those who voted said: you know what? We will pay more because we need it – our society needs that.

BOB HEERSPINK

Thinking of the big picture.

DAVE BAST

Yes, the common good, as you say; and to me, that is a question that ought to go into the equation for each of us as followers of Jesus Christ.

BOB HEERSPINK

The Bible doesn't dictate a certain answer to the healthcare question. It does say that we as Christians, if we are to be like the Good Samaritan, when we see someone who is having a healthcare crisis, we cannot just walk by on the other side.

DAVE BAST

Well, you know, one of the arguments is that this could wreck our current health system. We have great healthcare now. Yes, for those who can afford it, but even if it did mean a diminishing of service for everyone so that all could be included, shouldn't a Christian say: Well, maybe that is not bad? I just wonder.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, you know, I don't think we have all the answers, but I think these are the questions that the Christian community needs to wrestle with. You know, we need the best minds out there who understand, say, healthcare, or other social issues, to say: What is the best response we can make together to this?

DAVE BAST

Well, you can call me simplistic, but it just seems to me that if we step back and ask again the basic question, what do people deserve? People in a modern, prosperous country deserve to be taken care of when they are sick, somehow. Now, admittedly, we will argue about the best way to do that, and in fact, that is what politics often is. It is an argument over means not over ends. Maybe we agree on the end. We want prosperity, we want health, we want flourishing, but how do we attain that? That is legitimate. We can argue about that, but

I do believe that Christians at least, at the very least, ought to agree on the end that we want to see.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, I think as we look, Dave, at what the Gospel does, it really changes society; it really helps us to address, when we are living out our faith, issues of social transformation; and you know, I think about that and the fact that we both visited India, we are involved in ministry there; when I see the way in which the Gospel changes social structures, taking people who are at the bottom of the heap – untouchables – and lifting them up. Then I walk away and I say: you know, the Gospel isn't just about saving souls for heaven. It really is a transformative Gospel that changes culture, that brings social justice to people who have been walked upon and trampled upon; and in this series, that is what we want to explore. We want to discover the ways in which the Good News of Jesus Christ really works its way into the fabric of our societies.

DAVE BAST

But that is all we have time for today. Meanwhile, thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation; and don't forget it is listeners like you asking questions and participating that keep our topics relevant to your life. So weigh in. What do you think about social justice? Tell us what you feel about what you have been hearing, or suggest some topics that you would like to hear on future *Groundwork* programs. Visit us at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/to-do-justice>

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