

SPIRITUAL FORMATION ESSENTIALS¹

Part III – Becoming Like Christ...

Week 17 – Justice

Nothing has contributed to the progress of the superstition of the Christians as their charity to strangers.... The impious Galileans provide not only for their own poor, but for ours as well.

— Roman Emperor Julian the Apostate

When love intersects broken lives, Christ's disciples are called to stand for justice. Biblical justice means lifting the bonds of oppression, identifying with the cause of the poor and meeting the needs of the downtrodden.... There is a healthy tension in Scripture between deeds done for salvation and deeds done as evidence of salvation. It is clear that we cannot earn a righteous standing before a holy and perfect God, yet it is also clear that if we do not show evidence of a changed heart through our deeds of compassion, the reality of our salvation can be questioned.²

Last week we looked at Love—the biblical sort that is self-sacrificial and unifying. Today we look at **how** such love is expressed among those broken by our sin-ravaged world, particularly the poor and needy.

Why are the Poor Poor?

1 Corinthians 13:3 . . . if I give all my possessions to feed the poor...

Job 1: 3 . . . [Job] was the greatest [wealthiest] of all the men of the east. . . . 15 [Sabeans attacked and took the oxen and donkeys and slew the servants] 16 [fire from heaven burned up the sheep and servants] 17 [Chaldeans stole the camels and slew the servants] 19 [a house fell over and crushed to death Job's 10 children].

1 Thessalonians 3:10 . . . if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either. 11 For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies. 12 Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread.

Amos 5:10 [The Lord says of Israel:] *They hate him who reproves in the gate, and they abhor him who speaks with integrity. 11 Therefore because you impose heavy rent on the poor and exact a tribute of grain from them, though you have built houses of well-hewn stone, yet you will not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, yet you will not drink their wine. 12 For I know your transgressions are many and your sins are great you who distress the righteous and accept bribes and turn aside the poor in the gate. . . . 21 I hate, I reject your festivals, nor do I delight in your solemn assemblies. 22 "Even though you offer up to Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept them; and I will not even look at the peace offerings of your fatlings. 23 Take away from Me the noise of your songs; I will not even listen to the sound of your harps. 24 But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

The prophet Amos condemned sin against the poor that involved: (1) economic exploitation; (2) the wealthy hoarding in the face of others' poverty; and (3) a judicial system controlled by the wealthy that failed to protect the weak.

¹ This series follows Dr. Greg Ogden's, *Discipleship Essentials* (InterVarsity Press 1998) and incorporates, among other works, Dr. Donald S. Whitney's *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (NavPress 1991).

² Greg Ogden, 155, 157.

Consider other examples.³

God's Heart for Justice

Isaiah 58:

1 Cry loudly, do not hold back; raise your voice like a trumpet, and declare to My people their transgression and to the house of Jacob their sins.

2 Yet they seek Me day by day and delight to know My ways, as a nation that has done righteousness and has not forsaken the ordinance of their God. They ask Me for just decisions, they delight in the nearness of God.

3 'Why have we fasted and You do not see? Why have we humbled ourselves and You do not notice?' Behold, on the day of your fast you find your desire, and drive hard all your workers.

4 Behold, **you fast for** contention and strife and to strike with a wicked fist. You do not fast like you do today to make your voice heard on high.

5 Is it a fast like this which I choose, a day for a man to humble himself? Is it for bowing one's head like a reed and for spreading out sackcloth and ashes as a bed? Will you call this a fast, even an acceptable day to the LORD?

6 Is this not **the fast which I choose**, to loosen the bonds of wickedness, to undo the bands of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free and break every yoke?

7 Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into the house; when you see the naked, to cover him; and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?

8 Then your light will break out like the dawn, and your recovery will speedily spring forth; and your righteousness will go before you; the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.

9 Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; You will cry, and He will say, 'Here I am.' If you **remove the yoke from your midst**, the pointing of the finger and speaking wickedness,

10 And if you **give yourself** to the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then your light will rise in darkness and your gloom will become like midday.

11 And **the LORD will** continually guide you, and satisfy your desire in scorched places, and give strength to your bones; and you will be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water whose waters do not fail.

12 Those from among you will rebuild the ancient ruins; you will raise up the age-old foundations; and you will be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of the streets in which to dwell.

How have God's followers corrupted the practice of fasting? (vv.1-5)

What results does God promise from a true fast? (vv. 8-12)

What is God calling his people to do here?

What does this passage reveal about God's heart?

God's Promise of Justice to Come

Mathew 25:31 [Jesus said] *But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. 32 All the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; 33 and He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left.*

34 *Then the King will say to those on His right, 'Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. 35 'For I was **hungry**, and you gave Me*

³ Genesis 15:13 God said to Abram, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not their, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years. Luke 20:45 . . . Beware of the scribes . . . 47 who devour widows' houses . . .

something to eat; I was **thirsty**, and you gave Me something to drink; I was a **stranger**, and you invited Me in; 36 **naked**, and you clothed Me; I was **sick**, and you visited Me; I was **in prison**, and you came to Me.' 37 "Then the righteous will answer Him, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You something to drink?' 38 'And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You?' 39 'When did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' 40 "The King will answer and say to them, 'Truly I say to you, **to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.**'

41 Then He will also say to those on His left, 'Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels; 42 for I was hungry, and you gave Me **nothing** to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me nothing to drink; 43 I was a stranger, and you did not invite Me in; naked, and you did not clothe Me; sick, and in prison, and you did not visit Me.' 44 "Then they themselves also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not take care of You?' 45 "Then He will answer them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.' 46 "These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

What is the context of this passage?

On what basis will the sheep be welcomed into the kingdom?

What is Jesus' relationship with the downtrodden?

Consider each of the people Jesus identifies with. Where do we find them in our community?

What is keeping you from pursuing justice (more) for the poor and downtrodden?

Anyone who has seen himself as the man lying in the road, as spiritually poor, will then live a life of generosity toward the outcast and the needy.
— Timothy J. Keller, *Ministries of Mercy*

God's Progress within Injustice Today

What are the broad cultural regions of today's world?

Rank these areas from wealthiest to poorest economically.

Rank these areas from most to least vibrant in Christian spirituality.⁴

James 2:5 *Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith?*

We sit here today as the wealthy and powerful, but let us not forget that those who follow Christ will more often find themselves not with the comfortable majorities, but with the miserable minorities.

— U.S. Senator Mark Hatfield (OR), at a presidential prayer breakfast in Washington D.C.

⁴ In the least impoverished majority, the gospel is spreading at *twice* the population growth. Approximately 60% of all Christians reside in these areas.