



old testament, oppression, obedience

JOURNEYING TOWARD JUSTICE

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I grew up in what people in my faith tradition would call a “good Christian home.” We went to church three times a week (at least), my stepdad was a deacon, and he and my mom led a small group. They were faithful givers, welcomed outsiders, and displayed all the normal markers of a good, Christian family. I learned there the importance of prayer, reading the Bible, and, most importantly, of keeping my mouth shut.

If anyone had cared to peel back the layers a bit, they would have seen my bedroom door with a hole punched through it, the screaming I tried not to hear, and the red welts covering my younger brother’s body.

I tried terribly to get people to see, and that’s what ended up causing the most psychological damage, and ultimately what chased me right into the arms of the God of Scripture. I begged church leaders, men I knew my stepfather respected, for help. Rather than do anything to stop the hell I and my family were experiencing, though, they doubled down blaming me for the abuse. If only I were more submissive, kinder, more respectful, then perhaps things would be different. And under no circumstances should I continue to “slander” such a man of God.

I fled the situation in the only way I knew how—I moved in with my whisky-for-breakfast father. At least there I would find some quiet, some protection from the Christian home I’d grown up in. Later I learned from a friend and mentor about the imprecatory psalms, psalms that

call for God to bring justice. The phrases in the psalms are dark, visceral, and captured my own feelings toward the man who'd abused my family growing up. Phrases like "Break the teeth in their mouths, O God" (Ps 58:6 ESV) and "When he is tried, let him come forth guilty; let his prayer be counted as sin!" (Ps 109:7 ESV) became my prayers. And in fact, these Old Testament voices so impacted me that I went on to study the Old Testament in graduate school and have taught it now for nearly a decade.

The more I studied the Old Testament, the clearer it became that God is supremely concerned with the plight of the powerless. Deuteronomy 10:18 (CSB) states that God "executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the resident alien, giving him food and clothing." Likewise the Israelites "are also to love the resident alien, since you were resident aliens in the land of Egypt" (Deut 10:19 CSB). The next verse connects this posture toward the weak and vulnerable with fearing God and worshiping Him, the hallmarks of biblical faith. Finally, Deuteronomy 27:19 (CSB) identifies the most vulnerable people in Israelite society and issues a curse against anyone who would take advantage of these people: "The one who denies justice to a resident alien [essentially an immigrant lacking citizenship], a fatherless child, or a widow is cursed." In sum, to care for the vulnerable in society went hand-in-hand with following the Lord, and not to do so resulted in cursing, which is a clear indicator that one has failed to keep the requirements of living in a relationship with God. This, of course, resonated deeply with me because of my experiences growing up.

The Old Testament prophetic witness is likewise clear: God desires justice and righteousness to reign among His people. Through the prophet Amos, God said:

Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them;
and the peace offerings of your fattened animals,
I will not look upon them.
Take away from me the noise of your songs;
to the melody of your harps I will not listen.
But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

(Amos 5:22–24 ESV)

And through the prophet Micah, in response to the Israelite's questioning of God's requirements for pleasing Him, God said, "He 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?" (Mic 6:8 ESV). Justice and righteousness, not religious symbols and traditions, is what the Lord desires of His people. Put another way, how we treat others—particularly the vulnerable—demonstrates whether our faith in the Lord is real or simply make-believe.

The Old Testament's concern for the plight of the vulnerable is built upon another key Old Testament teaching—that all humans are created in God's image and hold value because of that very fact. Whereas humans are apt to think that the wealthy, the powerful, and the culturally influential are more valuable, the biblical witness teaches that this is not the case. The laws regarding protection of the weak and vulnerable anticipated that humans would attempt to exploit the weak for their own gain, as they fail to recognize the inherent humanness in all people. And the prophets showed that God was in fact serious about how people treat each other. All humans are equally valuable because all humans are created in God's image.

All of this reached a crescendo of sorts in my own journey toward justice when I listened to a sermon by a dean at a college where I was teaching. In it, he told women that if men were not pursuing them, it was because they were not taking care of their bodies. Then he compared sexually active women to crackhouses and later advised women to “mow [their] lawn,” further implying that a woman’s value lay not in her creation in the image of the almighty God but in how others viewed her sexual “purity” and physical attractiveness. This, of course, flies in the face of what Genesis says about women and men—that we all are created in the image of God and therefore hold value because of that and nothing else.

I was faced with the decision of either keeping my mouth shut, the lesson drilled into me as a child, or speaking out against a wrongheaded view of women. I chose the latter, believing that the biblical teachings about the image of God and how we treat others were so clear that everything would be quickly cleared up. Instead, I found myself in the same sort of situation I’d been in as a child decades ago. People more powerful than me, people who could fire me—and who threatened to do so if I persisted in protest—told me to be quiet and to beware confronting powerful people.

At this point in my life, though, I could be silent no longer. My wife and I spent hours talking through the chapel sermon and the implications that such theology has. What about the women in the audience who had been sexually abused? What about those who had had sex outside of marriage? Or those who were single? How would they feel being compared to a “crackhouse” or being told that their singleness resulted from being somehow physically unattractive? And would they believe it? Further, would the men in the audience believe these lies about women?

I knew from experience the damage that silence does, the biblical principle of God’s image in all people, and God’s care for the vulnerable in society; these had led me to a place where keeping quiet was no longer an option. I contemplated publishing an anonymous essay on a popular Southern Baptist website, but my wife urged me not to. “If it’s worth saying,” she told me, “then it’s worth putting your name on it. Don’t be a coward.” She was right. I soon resigned from my job, though even then friends and coworkers urged me not to talk about why I resigned because it would do nothing helpful, in their minds.

Of course, speaking up did cause trouble, but not to the extent that effected institutional or cultural change. That sort of large-scale change requires significant moral courage and effort from a great many people. It will require those who have power—however meager it may be—to wield that power for the benefit of the downtrodden and oppressed rather than for their own gain. It will require us to speak and act in defense of those who cannot speak and act in defense of themselves. And it will require us to speak clearly and consistently the whole counsel of God, which throughout condemns oppression and injustice. All of this may cost us something, but whatever the cost, it will be worth having been faithful to Jesus’s summation of the faith: love God and love neighbor.

As we think about journeying toward justice in each of our own lives, and what that may require of us, I’d like to share this encouragement from C. H. Spurgeon, who himself was no stranger to the criticisms and difficulties that come along with standing for the vulnerable in society. May we consider his words and seek to obey the Lord in all things, not

least in how we demonstrate love to our neighbors—and most especially those neighbors who are more likely to be exploited than cared for.

When a man can conscientiously say, “I did the right thing; I held the truth; I honored my God,” then the censures of other men go for little. In such a case, you have no trouble about the consequences of your action, for if any bad consequence should follow, the responsibility would not lie with you. You did what you were told. Having done what God himself commanded you, the consequences are with your Lord and not with you.⁵

⁵ Charles H. Spurgeon, “The Warnings and the Rewards of the Word of God,” in *Spurgeon’s Sermons*, vol. 36.