



Justice for the Poor

One-time England cricketer and later bishop of Liverpool, David Sheppard, famously wrote that God has a natural “bias to the poor”, that He positively discriminates in favour of those in need. It is certainly true that the bible speaks more about the subject of poverty and riches than it does about, say, prayer, so it must be a subject close to God’s heart. In this second study on justice, we are going to explore what God’s attitude is towards economic justice and how we should respond to those who have more or less than we do.

Not so Fast...

➔ There is always something a little disturbing when God looks at religious activity, especially when it is activity that He has commanded, and declares that it is just not good enough. Isaiah spoke to a people who at first sight were eager to walk with the Lord, and yet who had missed something fundamental...

Read Isaiah 58

? What links does Isaiah, or rather God speaking through Isaiah, make between justice and worship? Why do you think He specifically draws a parallel with *fasting*.

! Notice that the sins mentioned in this passage are mostly to do with the good things that the people had failed to do, rather than any evil things that they had actually done.

? Look at the various promises that God makes in this chapter. What do you think is meant by the picture language that is used here? What are the conditions which God places upon these promises?

! The New Testament is equally scathing towards people whose ‘religion’ doesn’t involve an active commitment to justice – read Matthew 23:23-24 and James 1:27.

God’s Welfare System

➔ What exactly were God’s people guilty of *not* doing? Let’s take a look at some of the provisions that were built into the Jewish Law from the outset to ensure a fair deal for those least able to provide for themselves.

? Read through each of the following four passages and ask:

- What, exactly, is God intending to achieve by this requirement? Who would benefit and how?
- What wider principles can you draw out from

this? Try to look beyond the time and culture that it was originally written to.

- How could we apply these principles today? Think of practical, creative ways that Christians in 21st century Britain could bring about the kind of social justice that God intended.

? Deuteronomy 14:28-29 talks of the ‘third-year tithe’, which was stored up as a kind of central welfare repository.

? Leviticus 19:9-10 lays down a system for exercising a kind of voluntary restraint upon profits, for the benefit of others. See also what Exodus 23:11 says about the Sabbath year.

? The seventh year was also a time for cancelling all outstanding debts – see Deuteronomy 15:1-2 and then read verses 7-10 where God guards against a cynical sidestepping of His requirements. Could we, should we take such measures today?

? Perhaps the most radical measure is laid down in Leviticus 25:8-16 – the ‘Year of Jubilee’. Think about the long term effects of this in terms of the acquisition of wealth and the development of social structures.

Final Thoughts

? Do you think that the existence of a state welfare system has any bearing on the church’s responsibilities in these matters?

? What would be the effect if a nationwide year of Jubilee, or seven-year cancellation of debts were to be introduced?

? Does God have a bias to the poor?

Recall the face of the poorest and most helpless person you have seen and ask yourself if the next step you contemplate is going to be of any use to that person.

Mohandas Gandhi