

Bible Study – Set Free From Stuff Part 5 – Justice (Seeking Freedom for Others)

Opening: What issues of justice and poverty do you come across in your life? Tell about an encounter with a person who asked you for help with an issue of poverty, need, or injustice.

Getting into God's Word

Ash Barker writes,

‘A Hebrew understanding of poverty is much broader than simply destitution. It has to do with oppression and the life God intends for those being crushed, who are made in God’s image... [Poverty] is by nature a lack of ability to live as God intended... Poverty, then, is about a lack of freedom to choose God’s shalom, to live a meaningful life. This kind of poverty faces the majority of the planet today and provides a starting point in understanding how we can respond to poverty. It is this definition of poverty that informed Jesus’ understanding of his mission to “Bring good news to the poor” (Luke 4:18-19).’ *Make Poverty Personal (MPP)* p 35

- In what way do you see such a definition of poverty, as a lack of ability to live as God intended, as applying not just to people ‘over there’ in a different country, but right here in our own city?

Read **Luke 4:14-21**.

- How does Jesus characterise his mission in his first words of public preaching in Luke’s gospel? How is his mission connected with justice? How is it connected with poverty?
- How do Jesus’ words apply to *us* and to the call to justice?

Insight: Justice is a key to understanding God’s Word

There are no less than fourteen different Hebrew words in the Bible for *oppression and injustice*.

There are more than five different Hebrew words for *the poor*.

There are more than 2,000 verses to do with poverty and injustice in the Bible.

Ash Barker writes,

‘In the 1970s [Jim Wallis] and a colleague actually went through the whole Bible with a pair of scissors and cut out every one of the 2000 verses that related to poverty and injustice. His was a very hole-y Bible indeed! People in pews were aghast as this cut-and-paste Bible was held up. But, as he pointed out, this is what most Christians do with this most holy book.’
Barker p18

If you want a very truncated glimpse at some of the other verses to do with justice and poverty in the Bible try a sampling of the following (Note that the two are always connected – allowing people to live in poverty *is* injustice or unrighteousness, because it mars the image of God in people, and poverty is often caused by oppression).

Exodus 3:7-10; Psalm 10, 11, 12; Isaiah 58:10-12; Micah 6:6-12; Matthew 19:16-26; Matthew 25:35-46; Luke 6:20-26; Acts 6:1-7; 2 Corinthians 8; 2 Cor 9; 1 Tim 6:17-19; Revelation 9:9-11

- How might an understanding of ‘justice’ as being at the very heart of the Scriptures and God’s plan for humanity transform your reading of the Scriptures? What parts of the Scriptures have you found difficult to understand because of their emphasis on justice?

‘Over and over again prophets are raised up to link the knowledge and worship of God with the doing of justice. Really to know God is to engage with the Lord’s compassion and justice. To fail to enter into these characteristics of the Lord is to fail to know God...The Lord God, who can’t be known through handmade stone and gold images – like the so called “gods” of other nations that the second commandment expressly prohibits – can be known through doing justice, compassion, and goodness. *MPP* p89

Insight: Some Sobering Statistics – whose rights are being trampled?

(accessed at www.globalissues.org/article/26/poverty-facts-and-stats)

- More than 80% of humanity lives on less than \$10 per day.
- More than 25,000 children die each day, due to poverty. That’s one every four seconds. Children dying simply because they are too poor to live. That’s the same death toll as three Asian Tsunamis every single month.
- Nearly a billion people entered the 21st Century unable to read a book or sign their names – nearly one in six has had not even the most basic of education.
- Some 1.1 billion people in developing countries have inadequate access to water, and 2.6 billion lack basic sanitation. There are some 1.8 million child deaths each year as a result of diarrhoea.
- Every year there are 350-500 million cases of malaria, with over 1 million fatalities each year. Of those, over 800,000 are African children.
- For every \$1 in aid a developing country receives, over \$25 is spent on debt repayment.
- The poorer the country, the more likely it is that debt repayments are being extracted directly from people who neither contracted the loans nor received any of the money.
- In 2005, the wealthiest 20% of the world accounted for 76.6% of total private consumption, and the poorest 20% just 1.5% of private consumption.
- It is almost guaranteed that every person reading this study will be in the top 10% of the world’s wealthiest people. (If you’re reading it on a computer then it is certainly true).
- In 2005, the wealthiest 10% of the world accounted for 59% of all private consumption. The poorest 10%, just 0.5%. (That means the wealthiest 10% are using one hundred and twenty times as much of the share of the world’s private consumption as the poorest 10%).
-

The statistics go on and on, and after a while they can become a bit mind-numbing.

But these are not just statistics. Every one of these represents a person who has been created in the image of God, a person for whom Jesus died.

- How do some of these problems, as described in the statistics above, ‘mar the image of God in a person?’ How do they describe a ‘lack of ability to live as God intended’ and ‘a lack of freedom to live a meaningful life?’
- Based on your reading of some of the Bible verses above, what is God’s response to poverty? What is God doing about oppression?
- Where is Jesus most likely to be found? (Matthew 25:35-46)

Application: How might WE as Christians, join God’s work of justice in the world?

(Note: in the following questions for application, I am indebted to Ash Barker’s book *Make Poverty Personal*, which takes readers on a journey through the entire Scriptures to read them through a lens which focuses on poverty and justice. I can only recommend to the reader of this study to get a copy of this book, and use it in a small group or personally, to help engage with God’s heart of compassion for the poor and oppressed.)

- What makes a ‘Christian’ response to poverty different from a ‘secular’ response to poverty? (2 Cor 8:1-5 and 1 Corinthians 13 might help with this.)
- What could God’s blessing and restitution look like for you in following Jesus and his heart for the poor?
- Acts 2:42-47; Acts 4:32-37. What most inspires you about the early church’s response to poverty? How do you experience it differently in today’s church?
- What could your faith community do to help end poverty and tackle issues of injustice (local, national, global) together?

What does God require of you?

Discuss the ways in which God may call you to use the following resources in tackling issues of poverty and injustice.

Money and resources: How might God call you to use your ‘excess’ to help others in their ‘need’ – financially and materially? How might such practices help to ‘set you free’ and make you more human? How might they help to ‘set others free’ and make them more human? (Aid and relief)

Your ears: How might God want you to use your *ears* to meet and listen to the poor, get to know their stories, and thus let them become real people, not just statistics, but persons made in the image of God? What may that look like in your life? (education and training)

Your eyes: _ How might God want to use your *eyes*, so that you don't utilise your right to remain ignorant, don't close your eyes to the plight of the poor, don't let Stuff blind you to what is really important? How does God want you to see the world in new ways? How can that also set you free?

Your voice: How might God call you to speak up for the poor, to advocate for the oppressed, to use your voice in the service of those who have no power, no voice of their own? How might you be part of God's proclamation of good news for the poor, and the year of the Lord's favour? (protest and advocacy)

Your heart: How might God change your *heart* for justice, so that your heart beats in time with his own heart of compassion for the broken, oppressed and dying ones? How might God want you to suffer with the suffering and with Christ in the world? How does God invite you to *know* God through the doing of justice, and to rejoice with those who are set free? (transformation)

There is an unashamed challenge in this study. This is a risk, because you might hear me saying that we *have to do something about justice in order to be justified by God*. But in fact I am not saying that. I am saying that *because we have been justified, we are called to do justice*. We are called to rediscover the connection between justification and justice. The Sovereign Lord has anointed us, too, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour and bring good news to the poor.

The challenge is this:

You, the readers of this study, are the ones whose education, training, intelligence, and economic circumstances mean you have an opportunity under God, and by God's grace, to change the future for thousands of others, through the seeking of justice and the living out of God's kingdom in the world around you. This is a direct challenge: what will you do with your life? How will you join in with God's purposes in the world? How will you use the gifts you have received to serve God, serve your neighbour, and seek freedom for others through justice?

In this study, what has God been saying to you? What are you going to do about it?

End with PRAYER for each of you to be involved in God's call to justice, and especially for those who are poor and oppressed.