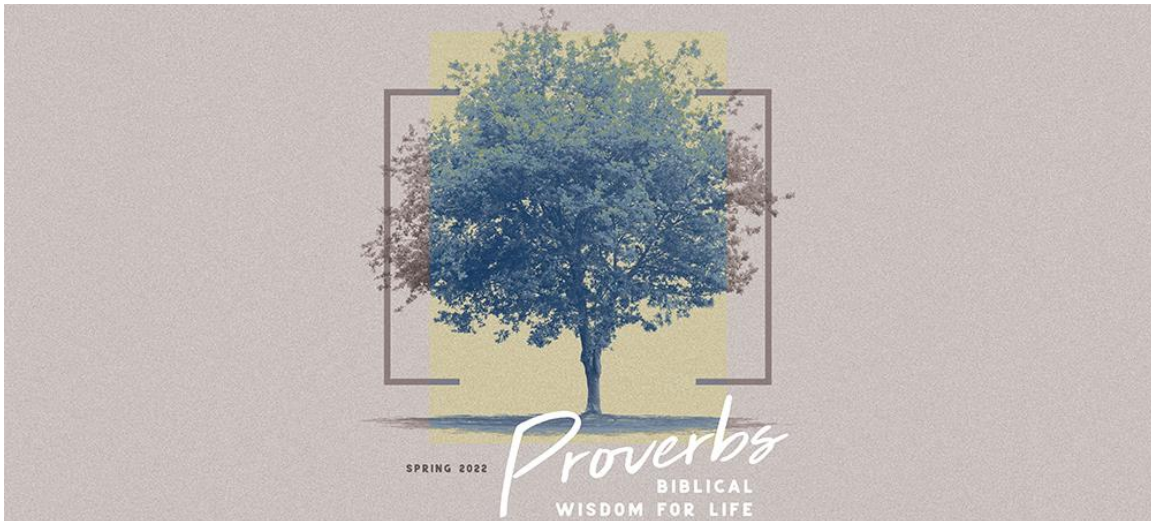


Week 6: Proverbs: Justice

Hook



Main Point: God’s command for justice should inspire His people to live justly and seek justice.

A hunter was charged with the crime of killing a bird out of season with his slingshot. After a lively debate from both counselors and the evidence was presented to the court, the hunter was found guilty. The hunter was administered a fine and community service. On the way out of the courthouse, the hunter stopped to speak with the court clerk. The court clerk suggested he set up a date to return with both the money for the fine and proof of community service. “That way,” the clerk said innocently, “you can kill two birds with one stone!”

Sometimes it is difficult to know how to live justly and seek justice. The court clerk innocently but inappropriately used an expression depicting the crime! It is unlikely the court clerk would have misspoken if she had all the information. God knew justice would be difficult for His people. Living justly and seeking justice requires as much information as possible. Because God has all the information, He should be our guide in living justly and seeking justice.

Q: Have you ever tried to seek justice without having all the information?

Q: Have you ever thought about your personal responsibility to seek justice?

Week 6: Proverbs: Justice

Book

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Proverbs 2:6–9; 3:27–30; 16:11; and 18:5 [Read]

Talking Point 1: Justice is giving someone what is due, both good and bad.

Q: How can we understand what is right, just and equitable?

There is no doubt that the Bible commands us to “do justice” and that our God is a God of justice (Deuteronomy 16:19–20; Proverbs 2:6–9; Micah 6:8;). But there's a lot of discussion about what that means because the term also has secular and political meanings. There are, also, different kinds of justice – economic, remedial, distributive, preventative, procedural, retributive and restorative. So, what does the Bible say about justice?

The Hebrew word for justice is *mishpat*, which means to treat people without bias or favoritism.¹ Biblically, justice refers to giving an individual what he or she deserves judicially, despite social status. Treating people justly means both not letting a criminal's punishment slide because he is rich or powerful as well as not denying equal rights to someone of lower status or honor. Equity refers to ignoring social status when punishing the wicked and honoring those who deserve to be honored.

These passages in Proverbs tell us that the Lord is the source of wisdom and the guardian of justice. And only by knowing Him and His wisdom can we understand what is good, right and equitable (2:6–9). These passages give us several different applications of what it looks like to “do justice”:

- Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due when you can do it (3:27–28).
- Do not plan evil against your neighbor who trusts you (3:29).
- Do not fight with someone when they haven't mistreated you (3:30).
- Be honest and fair in all your business dealings (16:11).
- Do not let the wicked get away with wrong or deprive the righteous of justice (18:5).

These are all connected to the overall idea of justice – giving people their due regardless of race, social status or other traits. It goes deeper than bringing criminals to justice; it extends to ensuring justice (what is right in God's eyes) is done in all areas of your own

life, work and personal relationships. It's more than just not mistreating people; it's doing good for them whenever you can.

God's laws of justice make generosity a command, not just a nice thing to do.² It's making sure you act justly, rightly and equitably yourself and making sure others do, too – fighting against injustice whenever you see it in other people, places and businesses. Fighting injustice isn't just an optional extra thing you can do; it's a command for everyone who claims to follow the God of the Scriptures. The word translated "not good" in 18:5 has a much stronger meaning in Hebrew. It is not just "not good" to show partiality; it is "reprehensible, vile and wrong."³ A call to biblical justice requires Christians to take honest inventory in their hearts and immediate spheres of influence and act accordingly with God's understanding of justice.

Q: Describe a time when you were treated unjustly. How did that make you feel?

Q: How do you see injustice in the world and in communities and relationships around you?

Deuteronomy 10:17–19; Proverbs 14:20–21, 31; 17:5; 21:13; 31:8–9 [Read]

Talking Point 2: Don't show partiality to the rich and powerful.

Q: Why do these verses talk about the poor so much? What do the poor have to do with justice?

Q: Why do the poor and oppressed need someone to defend them?

Many of the proverbs (and other laws in the Old Testament) that talk about justice focus on justice specifically for the poor and vulnerable. This isn't because the poor deserve justice more than everyone else but because they are the ones who most often are in danger of being deprived of justice or treated unjustly. Because they don't have the social status or economic power that the rich or even the middle class do.

Of course, God cares about everyone's getting justice, but those who have money, status or power can typically get justice on their own. It's the vulnerable who need someone else to seek justice for them (Proverbs 31:8–9). When God described Himself in Deuteronomy 10:17–19, He said that He is the "great and mighty," and that He "does not show partiality or take a bribe." This is the kind of God we serve and the type of character we should reflect. God's law was set up in such a way that if His people really followed it, there would be no injustice among them. Yet He knew they wouldn't obey,

so He commanded them to give generously to the poor, to “not harden your heart or shut your hand” against them, to “give to them freely” (Deuteronomy 15:1–11). Just as He redeemed them when they were slaves in Egypt and gave freely to them.

The way we care for the poor is a response to the way God has cared for us. When we fight for justice for the vulnerable, we reflect His character. Proverbs tells us that most people treat the poor with contempt but try to befriend the rich and powerful (14:20–21). But Jesus treated the poor and the outcast with respect, dignity, and as having equal value as the rich and powerful. As His people, we are to do the same (James 2).

Proverbs tells us that because the poor are created in God’s image just like everyone else, when we show contempt for the poor, we are actually mocking God (14:31; 17:5).⁴ Just as Jesus will say when He separates the sheep from the goats on Judgment Day, our true faith is revealed by how we treat “the least of these” (Matthew 25:31–46). This is why whoever “closes his ear” to the cry of the poor will not be answered by God when they cry out to Him.

Those who know and love God will love people the way He does. This includes having a heart of generosity to the poor and fighting for justice for the vulnerable. Speaking up for those who cannot speak for themselves. Fighting for justice for those who are oppressed is the very core of who God is.

Q: Why do people often struggle with how to help the poor?

Q: How can we help them in a way that doesn’t treat them as “projects” but as children of God with equal human dignity to ourselves?

Proverbs 11:1; 16:11; 20:23; 21:15; 22:16, 22 [Read]

Several of these proverbs are very similar; that’s intentional repetition.

Talking Point 3: Don’t be dishonest or oppress the poor to gain wealth or power.

Q: Why do you think Solomon repeated the proverb about just balances so much? What does it reveal to you about God’s character that He delights in balanced scales?

Q: Why is justice a terror to evildoers, but joy to the righteous?

These proverbs discuss those who cheat anyone for financial gain. This was a common practice in the ancient world, which we can deduce from the number of times Solomon repeated this proverb. It was common in the ancient world for a business person to have (at least) two sets of scales and measures, one that was accurate and one that was

heavier or lighter so they could trick their customers into thinking they were getting more for their money than they really were (i.e., the scale may indicate three ephahs of grain, but it is really only two). God's law forbids that practice (Leviticus 19:35–36; Deuteronomy 25:13–16), and several of the prophets also condemned it, which means the people of Israel were doing it even though God had told them not to (Ezekiel 45:10; Amos 8:5; Micah 6:11). Deuteronomy tells us that dishonest business practices are “an abomination” to the Lord.⁵

This is an issue of personal justice, and it can be applied to much more than scales and measures. In general, don't trick or mislead people for your own gain – in any situation. Justice is being fair and honest in all your practices. It can be integrity in business, but it can also be not taking advantage of friends who are willing to help you out with childcare and always dumping your kids on them without reciprocating. It may mean asking a friend to volunteer in your organization but being deceitful about how much time it will take from them.

We can apply this proverb a million ways. In general, don't take advantage of people. Don't cheat anyone out of time or money in any way. Practice justice in everything you do. Again, this isn't optional; it's part of the very nature of being God's people. The strong contrasting language and synonymous parallelism in Proverbs points to that: “A false balance is an *abomination* to the Lord, but a just weight is His *delight*” (11:1).⁶

Proverbs 21:15 tells us that “when justice is done, it's a joy to the righteous but terror to the evildoers.” Scripture uses similar language to talk about the Day of the Lord (or Day of Judgment), that it will be a day of terror and for judgment the wicked but vindication for the righteous. The only people who are upset when justice is done are the ones who benefit from the injustice.

The righteous should always rejoice when justice is done or an injustice is corrected, even if it doesn't personally affect them, simply because things are being made right, the way they should be. Think about how you might feel when a well-known criminal is finally found guilty. You would rejoice for the families of their victims because, even though it will never bring their loved ones back, they finally received justice. The only ones who might be upset in that courtroom would be the criminal and maybe his lawyer. We should feel the same way any time an injustice is righted anywhere in the world. And it's why we, as God's people, should fight so hard for justice for those who cannot fight for themselves.

Q: Give some examples of ways people are tempted to take advantage of others, both in their business practices and personal lives.

Q: Describe a time that you found joy in justice being done for someone else.

Week 6: Proverbs: Justice and Oppression

Took

Main Point: God's command for justice should inspire His people to live justly and seek justice.

Typically, people do not view justice as a personal responsibility. Unless someone is in the criminal justice profession, the average person passively seeks justice. God's call is for all believers to actively seek justice in their personal lives and the world around them. Take a couple of moments to consider how you can take a proactive role in living justly. Can you think of one area of your life that is not being lived justly?

Christians should be the model for how to administer justice in the world. Consider the interactions of your typical day. Is there an opportunity to seek justice for someone being treated wrongly? How can you seek justice in this situation? Giving a person what is due (good and bad) regardless of his/her social status with a balanced scale is God's expectation of justice.

CHALLENGES

THINK: In what ways do you see injustice being done in the world around you? Maybe someone is being treated unjustly at work, in your neighborhood, or among your friends. Maybe it's something you see being done in another city or even on the other side of the world. Maybe it's the business practices of companies you support. How can you fight for justice in each of those situations?

PRAY: Ask God to reveal to you any way you are living unjustly in your own personal life. Is there any way you are treating someone unjustly or taking advantage of him or her, even your spouse, children or other close family? Ask Him to examine your heart and dig deep to show you where He wants you to change.

ACT: Defend the vulnerable. Choose one way this week that you can defend or fight for justice for the vulnerable. It may be something as simple as donating money to organizations that fight for justice. It may be doing something yourself to speak for someone who can't speak for themselves.

¹ Rick Brannan, ed., *Lexham Research Lexicon of the Hebrew Bible*, Lexham Research Lexicons (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020).

² Allen P. Ross, "Proverbs," Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Proverbs–Isaiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008).

³ Allen P. Ross, "Proverbs," Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Proverbs–Isaiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008).

⁴ W. Gunther Plaut, *Book of Proverbs, Jewish Commentary for Bible Readers* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1961).

⁵ John H Walton, Mark Chavalas, and Victor H. Matthews, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2000).

⁶ Allen P. Ross, "Proverbs," Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Proverbs–Isaiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008).