



Fix Your Focus: Biblical Justice

Isaiah 40:1-5, 12-20

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What does the Lord require of you? But to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.

These are the words of the prophet Micah, as he addressed the people of Israel – the nation of God’s faithful – in a season of fear of what might become of them for their transgressions against the Lord and one another. Last week, we took a deep look at Micah, and we considered the liminal moment when these words of the prophet were spoken. It is not too far a stretch to see the challenges and failures of Israel, to whom Micah was speaking, as similar to our own challenges and failures in America today.

I am not convinced that Micah – or any prophet – would change their naming of such Godly instructions to the faithful of the Lord today. In a world where-in the powerful exert their power in ways that oppress the poor; in a nation where-in wealth flows to the top, and not to those struggling to pay their bills; in a land where children of immigrants are caged and refugees are refused entrance; in a season during which the perversion of the truth is lifted up as righteous, and the actual truth is denied; in a liminal time of our own, during which hundreds of thousands of savable lives are expensed at the insistence of personal freedoms ... I can hear the prophet saying once more: The Lord has told you what is good. What does the Lord require of you? But do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.

These instructions seem so simple, and yet, we are a privileged people who like to wordsmith our way into faithfulness. We like to quote the Biblical texts that support our vision of discipleship. We like to find pastors who preach in a way that echo our already deeply-formed spiritual beliefs. We like to ignore the cultural differences of Israel in the ancient near-east when the ancient texts support our antiquated thinking, but maintain such cultural differences when trying to refute modern applications. We like to apply 21st Century Miriam-Webster English definitions to words that predate the advent of Christ, or the printing press, or text messages ... #amirite?

So in the coming six weeks, we’re doing a deep dive in the Biblical text to better understand the instructions of the prophet. What is justice – as defined in the Biblical story? And how does that definition – that Biblically mandated definition of justice – shape our faithfulness today? We’ll ask the same questions about mercy – or kindness – and humility. What does it mean to walk humbly with God?

Today, we start with a Biblical perspective on *do justice*. Let's start with the noun. What is *justice*?

The word *justice* in the Old Testament is translated from the Hebrew word *mishpât* (mish-pawt). Rabbi Julian Sinclair says that "*Mishpat* is today the modern Hebrew word for law. A *mishpatan* is a lawyer." He continues, "*Mishpat*, [meaning] a justly ordered society, is one of the foundational values of Judaism."¹

The word *mishpat* appears in the Hebrew Scriptures over 400 times, and is translated in a variety of ways, including "justice," "judgement," and "law." It's Greek counterpart, found in the New Testament, is the Greek word *krino* (kree-no).

There are many uses of these two words that could help us understand the spoken intent of Micah, when he says, "do justice." I'm going to break my number rule, and offer a number of these texts out of their greater context, before focusing in on Isaiah 40 in its full context to pull these varying verses back together. Hear the word of the Lord:

Deuteronomy 16:20 reads, "Pursue justice and justice alone, so that you will live and possess the land the Lord your God is giving you."

2 Samuel 8:15, speaking of King David, offers, "So David reigned over all Israel, administering justice and righteousness for all his people."

In Psalm 33:5, the poet writes, "[The Lord] loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of the Lord's unfailing love."

In Proverbs 17:23, we read, "A wicked person secretly takes a bribe to subvert the course of justice."

Just a few chapters later, Proverbs 29:4 offers, "By justice a king brings stability to a land, but a person who demands 'contributions' demolishes it."

In Jeremiah 22:3, the prophet speaks, "This is what the Lord says: Administer justice and righteousness. Rescue the victim of robbery from his oppressor. Don't exploit or brutalize the resident alien, the fatherless, or the widow. Don't shed innocent blood in this place."

Matthew 12:18, using the Greek, *krino*, the apostle writes in the voice of God, speaking, "Here is my servant whom I have chosen, my beloved in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations."

In Acts 24:25, Luke writes, "As Paul talked about righteousness, self-control, and judgement (or justice) to come, Felix was afraid and said, 'That's enough for now! You may leave. When I find it convenient, I will send for you.'"

How often today do we speak like Felix when thinking of justice, saying, “I’ve heard enough for now. When it’s convenient for me, I’ll invite you to come back.”

There are many verses that speak of God’s desire and intent for justice – but what does it mean? How do we conceptualize what the Biblical text means using this word, whether in the law, the prophets, the psalms, the gospel, or the letters?

To pull these all together, we look at Isaiah 40.

The Book of Isaiah offers a prophetic word to God’s people before, during, and after the Babylonian exile. The first 39 chapters of Isaiah, which is often called *proto* (or *first*) Isaiah, was written in the time prior to the Babylonian exile. It was Isaiah’s way of warning the people of God of that which was to come should they not turn back to God in faithfulness. They did not respond in the way of faithfulness, and so the Babylonian exile began around 587 BCE. The Southern Kingdom of Judah was sent off from the Promised Land for an extended time in exile due to their prior transgressions.

Isaiah 40 begins the second section of Isaiah’s prophetic writing, often called *deutero* Isaiah. This text is set around 545 BCE, about 40 years after the exile had begun. It is a promise of a more faithful time to come, that will be the result of God’s faithfulness. Though the unfaithfulness of God’s people led them into exile, it will be God’s faithfulness that leads them home. The exilic period will only last about 10 more years, before the Israelites are able to return to the land of Judah.

You can hear the promise of God’s hope in verse 1 of Isaiah 40, as it proclaims, “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.” It speaks a word of shifting to come to a people who are currently in exile, and who have been in exile for some 40 years. It also leaves no doubt that their exile was the result of their own transgressions, offering in verse two, “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her, for she has served her term, her penalty is paid.”

The announcement has come from the prophet, speaking on behalf of God, “the life-giving glory of the Lord was about to be revealed, and a lost nation was again to be gathered and shepherded.”ⁱⁱ

Verse 3 then lays out the work of God in reconciliation. It names the restorative work of God to return the people of Israel home. It is, as you may hear in its proclamation, the text that is referenced by John the Baptist as he declares the arrival of Christ as the Messiah some 540 years later. The Gospel of John 1:23 remembers this text, offering, “[John said,] ‘I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, “Make straight the way of the Lord”’; as the prophet Isaiah said.”

This text, offered by the prophet Isaiah, and recalled by the prophet John, names the way of God, both in the Hebrew Scriptures of the Old Testament, and in the Gospel text of the New Testament. This way, which is about to be defined, is the way of God.

How is it defined? I'm glad you asked.

Verse 3-5 reads, 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.'

The people of Israel had been exiled to the east in the region of Babylon. Between Babylon and their homeland, the terrain is mostly arid and rocky desert. In the midst of this desert, bordering the land of Judah, is the Jordan River, which forms the Jordan Valley. It includes mountains and valleys, which stretch into the lowest regions of earth around the Dead Sea. It is generally not an easy passage to traverse.

As Isaiah is declaring how God will deliver God's people home, he offers this vision of God controlling creation to make the passage one of ease. The mountains and hills will be made low; the valleys shall be lifted up; the uneven surfaces made level. It offers this vision of creation working in unity to create a path for God's people to return to a life of faithfulness in the Promised Land, from which they had been exiled. The pathway is a "preparation for the unveiling of the glory of God that will be revealed to all."ⁱⁱⁱ

As we keep reading in Isaiah 40, it becomes clear that such an declaration is called into question.

There was, in the ancient near east, a smattering of religious belief in different gods. Each of the early empires held faith in a different god, and together, there was a common belief that these gods all sat together on a "council of the gods."^{iv} As Isaiah continues to mark this transition from a struggling time in exile to the hope of returning home, he is marking a clear distinction between the Lord of Israel, and the other gods of the empires. "Among the gods of the divine council, Israel's God alone proved to be committed to compassionate justice and protection of the vulnerable."

And so in verses 12-20, through a series of rhetorical questions, Isaiah will define and declare the work of God as unique and as almighty. "Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span? ... Who has directed the spirit of the Lord, or as his counsellor has instructed him? ... Who did he consult for his enlightenment, and who taught him the path of justice?" The answer is, no one has taught the Lord, no one has directed the Lord, no one has controlled the Lord, no one has granted power to the Lord ... these are of God, for God is, and God alone is, almighty. And the way of God is, unlike the ways of the empires around them, a way that doesn't look like the way of other nations. God leads Israel in a path that is not directed by the faux-gods of the other nations.

God's way – the path of justice – looks like the alteration of creation for the sake of allowing humanity to know God's glory and to live in faithfulness. Though, in this text in Isaiah 40, the

alteration of creation is utilized to define how God will return the exiles back to their homeland, it is, throughout the entirety of the Biblical text, the model of justice God demands. What we see, time and time again, is that God desires the high to be made low, the low to be made high, and the path to be made level. And this is not just a spiritual path, it is a material path as well. “Both – the spiritual and the material – are necessary components of the good news of salvation.”^v

Justice for God is about a way of living where all are treated with *equity*. To be clear, God does not demand for all to be treated *equally* – the high and the low are treated differently, in order that all of creation might be brought into *equality*. We see this vision of justice offered time and again in the Old Testament, like in Leviticus 25, with the institution of the Year of Jubilee. The desire of God was for everyone to have what they needed, sufficiently, without abundance. When abundance took place, it was to be returned to recreate equality throughout the community. It is this vision of equality that defines the use of *mishpât* throughout the Biblical text – the use of justice throughout God’s instructive word. So consider God’s word:

“A wicked person takes a bribe to subvert the course of justice.” -> They try to get themselves ahead at the expense of others, and this does not lead to God’s desire of justice, thus they are called wicked.

“Administer justice and righteousness. Rescue the victim of robbery from his oppressor. Don’t exploit or brutalize the resident alien, the fatherless, or the widow.” -> Lift high those who are low. Help those who are abandoned. This is the way of God’s justice, where those who do not have equality, are given preference to restore equality.

“Pursue justice and justice alone, so that you will live and possess the land the Lord your God is giving you.” -> God has given you enough, do not take from others. For God’s way is justice, but the imperialistic way of empires is not.

And this is the promise of God seen in the New Testament in the advent of Jesus Christ. Jesus spoke against the power of the empire, even against the privilege of the religious elite, while giving preference to the poor, the blind, the widow, the lame, the foreigner, and the outcast. Jesus says, in John 9:39, “For I have come into this world for *krino* – for justice – so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind.” He came to level the field, like the work claimed of God in Isaiah in the wilderness, to make level the path of faithfulness.

Jesus’ teaching reiterates this path, time and time again. From the rich young ruler who was told to sell all he had and give the proceeds to the poor, to the Samaritan who aided the abused traveler on the roadside, to the Rabbi washing the feet of his disciples, to the God of the universe giving himself for the sin of humanity. The high is made low, the low is made high, that all might be as one.

The way of God is the way of justice, and throughout the Biblical text, this way is defined as a way where each of – all of us – every one of humanity is given an equal path.

This way of God, it is unlike any other way. This is not the way of empires or rules, kings or kingdoms, presidents or nations. And yet, it is the way of God.

So now that we have defined *justice* from the Biblical text, we can ask, “What does it mean to *do* justice?” That is Micah’s instruction: do justice. That will be our focus next week, as we ask, in the modern world, how do we apply God’s call for us as the faithful of God to fulfill the prophets instructive guidance? Knowing what justice is – understanding God’s work of *mishpât* – how do we live as God’s faithful people today? May we hear, discern, and live in faithfulness to the Lord, that God’s justice may lead our path. Amen.

ⁱ Rabbi Julian Sinclair. *Mishpat*. March 6, 2009. <http://thejc.com>. Retrieved September 17, 2020.

ⁱⁱ Paul D. Hanson. *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, Isaiah 40-66*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012.

ⁱⁱⁱ Brevard S. Childs. *Isaiah: A Commentary*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000.

^{iv} Hanson.

^v Mae Elise Cannon. *Beyond Hashtag Activism: Comprehensive Justice in a Complicated Age*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020.