



FOUNDATIONS FOR HOLISTIC MINISTRY

LESSON FIVE - "PROPHETS: HOW ARE WE TO WORSHIP?"

Introduction to the Lesson

In the last lesson we learned of some of the high demands for social justice and generosity demanded in the Covenant law. We know that the Israelites did not always live up to these high ideals and God would once again use human agents to intervene and bring God's messages to the people. We call these agents prophets. In this study, we will look at some of the prophets who proclaimed God's justice in their own day and how their words relate to holistic ministry today.

Key Scripture: Amos 5:21-22, 24; Micah 6:6-8; Isaiah 58, 42:5-9; (Luke 4:18-19)

Key points:

- o Justice is the righteousness God requires
- o Personal piety cannot be separated from acts of justice

Lesson

Justice and Righteousness

The concepts of justice and righteousness were key concepts in the Old Testament, prophetic literature. The prophets brought messages of God's expectation of justice and righteousness to the Israelites. The two Hebrew words used in the Old Testament, *mishpat* (justice) and *sedeqa* (righteousness), are consistently found together in scripture, approximately 30 times, and are a constant theme of the prophets. These terms are used relationally within the Old Testament, used to interpret the Covenant between God and the Israelites. They are words used to define how the Israelites maintain their relationship with God and with their neighbors.

Righteousness gives light as to how one is to live out God's justice. Righteousness is living in right relationship with God. The way to live in right relationship with God is to seek justice for God's people. In our Western culture we tend to equate justice with impartiality, "justice is blind." However, this is not the way God views justice. Throughout scripture God consistently places God's focus and attention on the suffering, poor, and marginalized. To live in right relationship with God, to live righteously, is to consistently place our focus and attention on the suffering, poor, and marginalized as well.

The Prophets

Almost all of the prophets discuss aspects of social justice within their writings, however we will focus on three prophets that are key to our topic today. These three are Amos, Micah, and Isaiah. Each has very important messages that apply to us today.

Amos

Perhaps the most familiar prophetic passage speaking of justice and righteousness comes from the prophet Amos:

But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream (5:24).

In Amos' day, the wealthy few were greedily trying to get richer and completely ignoring the desperation of the poor. A common practice was to cheat through crooked scales, thereby robbing from farm workers their rightfully earned wages and food. This is eerily reminiscent of the economic conditions of today. Today some farm workers are not paid agreed upon wages at the end of a work day by dishonest landowners. Workers in third world factories producing cheap garments for first world consumers do not receive fair compensation for their piece work. Much of the economic crisis we are in today is due to a wealthy few trying to get richer. In Amos' day, as well as ours, the thought was that what happens in the marketplace does not affect what we do in religious devotion. In other words, business is business and religion is religion.

The Israelites learned, however, that the sacred and the secular cannot be separated. Amos 5:21-22 issues harsh words from God to the Israelites regarding their religious practices. Religious piety means nothing if the people are, in everyday business and commerce, engaged in unfair practices and oppression of the poor. This type of lifestyle, the separation of the sacred and secular is not what God requires. God does not view the way we treat people in everyday life separate from the way we worship God. What then does God require of us? The answer is given in our next prophet: Micah.

Micah

The scathing words of Amos leave us asking, "What does God require of us to live a righteous life?" Micah answers this question in 6:6-8. There are only three acts God requires of us to live a righteous life: doing justice, loving in kindness, and walking humbly with God (v. 8). These are the acts of worship God accepts. If we are not doing these then we are not living righteously. For many of us it is easy to do the last two because they are a normal part of our Western Christian education. We are taught that being a Christian means loving people, "seeing the Jesus in everyone," and practicing personal piety—reading our Bibles daily, attending church, and spending time in private prayer. However, according to Micah, personal piety also includes seeking justice. This cannot be separated from our worship of God.

Isaiah

Finally, Isaiah also speaks of justice as an act of worship. If it is not rituals of worship that are the most important to God, how are we to put our faith into practice? Isaiah 58:6-12 offers some insight. The fast, or act of worship, that God requires is that we "loose the bonds of injustice" and "let the oppressed go free" (v.6). It is to "share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house, when you see the naked, to cover them" (v. 7). Isaiah says that if you do this then, "your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday" (v. 10).

The acts God requires of us are not only reading our Bible, praying, attending worship every week, and doing evangelism. While all these actions are good, we are also to be helping people who are homeless on our streets, people who are fighting against the tidal wave of poverty and losing, and those who are enslaved by their debts, and changing the systems that contribute to homelessness, poverty, and oppression .

As we learned in our first lesson, as Jesus began his ministry on earth he turned to the prophet Isaiah to explain his purpose. Jesus turned to Isaiah 42:5-9. Jesus was declaring this new day, building upon the covenant God had established with God's people as he began his earthly ministry (Luke 4:18-19). With Isaiah's teachings, we see an inclusiveness and forward look to a fuller revelation of God's work in the world through the promised Messiah that will encompass all the people of the world. In this passage we see a summation of what we have learned about the God of Creation and the God of the Covenant, who favors the oppressed and expects us to deal with them in justice and righteousness.

Reflection Questions

o We no longer come to worship with burnt offerings or containers of oil, but do we sometimes offer



lesser sacrifices to God in our own day? What are they?

- o What are ways we can do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God today?
- o What are ways in our everyday business or consumer lives do we participate in oppression and unfair practices?

Individual Reflection

Reread Isaiah 42:5-9 and 58. What actions in these passages offer you practical application for your life today? In what ways can you bring together personal piety and justice in your life?

Benediction

Micah 6:6-8:

With what shall I come before the LORD and bow down before the exalted God?

Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?

Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousand rivers of oil?

Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you?

To act justly

and to love mercy

and to walk humbly with your God.



Call To Be Attentive

For one week keep a journal of the time spent in traditional acts of religious piety (Bible reading, church meetings, prayer, etc) and time spent on justice activities. Is this list balanced? Should it be balanced? What are ways you can work to make this list more balanced?.

Sources

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