

The Role of the Church in the Community Justice and Mercy in the Old Testament: Part 1

Lesson #3 for July 16, 2016

Scriptures: Exodus 22:21-23; 23:2-9; Amos 8:4-7; Isaiah 1:10-17; 58:1-14; Acts 20:35.

1. This lesson will discuss various passages in the Old Testament in which God's instructions to the Israelites described how He feels about orphans, widows, and foreigners. It will contrast Israel's religious behavior with His instructions.

Years ago, on a cold day in New York City, a 10-year-old boy, barefoot and shivering, peered in the window of a shoe store. A woman came to the boy and asked why he was looking so earnestly in the window; he said that he was asking God to give him a pair of shoes. The woman took him by the hand into the store. She asked the clerk to bring six pairs of socks; she also requested a basin of water and a towel. Taking the lad to the back of the store, she removed her gloves, washed his feet, and dried them with the towel. The clerk returned with the socks. The woman placed a pair on the boy's feet and then bought him a pair of shoes. She patted his head and asked him if he felt more comfortable now. As she turned to go, the astonished lad took her hand and tearfully asked, "Are you God's wife?"—<http://www.inspirationalstories.com/1/198.html>.—As Quoted in *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* for Sabbath July 9.

That little boy spoke more truth than he realized. God's church *is* His bride, His wife. His character is expressed in the memory verse [Psalm 146:7-9]. As transformed members of His church, we must reflect that character. If we are truly His, we will passionately care about and provide for the poor and the powerless.—*ibid.* [Content in brackets is added.]

2. As we know, God's original plan for this earth was for all of us to be living in the Garden of Eden. But, when we committed sin, we were thrust out of the garden and forced to make our way outside in a sin-cursed world. That environment has turned into a place of greed, injustice, and cruelty. But, in God's dealing with His children, social justice has been a part of His laws and ideals for His people. It has always been God's plan for people to have their needs met, to flourish, and to have peace reign.
3. Read Exodus 22:21-23; 23:2-9; Leviticus 19:10; and Proverbs 14:31; 29:7. In these verses, God makes it very clear how His people should treat orphans, widows, and foreigners. If the Israelites mistreated them, He threatened that "your wives will become widows, and your children will be fatherless." He told them to be very careful not to pervert justice and not to show partiality. They were never to accept a bribe. When harvesting their crops, they were to leave whatever grapes or grain were left in the field for the poor. In some cultures today, it is not a sin to do such things; but, it is a sin to get caught!
4. There are three types of "Sabbath rests" outlined in Scripture for the ancient Hebrews:
 1. There was the seventh-day Sabbath.

Read Exodus 20:8-11. In these verses we have a description of the seventh-day Sabbath; the Israelites were told that the seventh day is a day of rest dedicated to God. On that day no one was/is to work—neither you, your children, your slaves, your animals, nor the foreigners who live in your country.

2. There was a seventh-year Sabbath.

Exodus 23:10-11 (GNB): ¹⁰ “For six years sow your field and gather in what it produces. ¹¹But in the seventh year let it rest, and do not harvest anything that grows on it. The poor may eat what grows there, and the wild animals can have what is left. Do the same with your vineyards and your olive trees.”

Did everyone do that at the same time? Or, could one rotate his fields so that 1/7 of his fields or orchards could rest each year? God actually promised that He would care for those who practiced this “Sabbath year.” (Leviticus 25:1-7)

3. Finally, there was the jubilee-year Sabbath.

Leviticus 25:10-17 (GNB): ¹⁰In this way you shall set the fiftieth year apart and proclaim freedom to all the inhabitants of the land. During this year all property that has been sold shall be restored to the original owner or his descendants, and anyone who has been sold as a slave shall return to his family. ¹¹You shall not sow your fields or harvest the corn that grows by itself or gather the grapes in your unpruned vineyards. ¹²The whole year shall be sacred for you; you shall eat only what the fields produce of themselves.

¹³ In this year all property that has been sold shall be restored to its original owner. ¹⁴So when you sell land to your fellow-Israelite or buy land from him, do not deal unfairly. ¹⁵The price is to be fixed according to the number of years the land can produce crops before the next Year of Restoration. ¹⁶If there are many years, the price shall be higher, but if there are only a few years, the price shall be lower, because what is being sold is the number of crops the land can produce. ¹⁷Do not cheat a fellow-Israelite, but obey the LORD your God.

Were they allowed to cheat the foreigners? These regulations apparently applied only to Israelites. But, they were also to treat foreigners with dignity and respect. Remember that every family/tribe had its assigned territory.

Consider this from the *Bible Study Guide*.

1. Instructions in keeping the seventh-day Sabbath included providing equal opportunity for everyone to rest, including servants, animals, and foreigners.
2. Every seven years, the Sabbath year was a time for canceling debts, for showing concern for the poor, and for freeing slaves. God instructed His people to include the animals in the benefits of the Sabbath year (see *Lev. 25:6, 7*).
3. The year of jubilee came on the fiftieth year, after seven Sabbath years. Property that was sold was restored to the original owner; debts were forgiven; and prisoners and slaves were set free. Jubilee was an equalizer of society, a reboot to give everyone an opportunity to begin anew. It was a “safeguard . . . against the extremes of either wealth or want.”—Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, p. 185.2.—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* for Sunday, July 10. Compare *To Be Like Jesus* 171.5.
5. Clearly, God wanted justice to be done for the poor, the helpless, and the needy in society.
6. Read Genesis 2:1-3. Remember that our seventh-day is based on the rotation of our earth. We are not aware of any other planet that rotates exactly the same as we do. So, it would be only on this earth where we would have our particular seven-day cycle. Long before there was a single Hebrew or Jew, God made it clear that He rested on the Sabbath day and intended for all of His creation to stop working on that day. Furthermore, according to Exodus 23:12, we are to allow all those who work for us to rest on that day as well. Isaiah

66:22-23 makes it clear that God will continue to bless the Sabbath and worship on that day with us even in the new heavens and the new earth. There was no suggestion that worshipers on that day will be treated differently based on their social status or their wealth. Of course, we have no way to know how the Sabbath will be determined in heaven. If we will be worshiping together with people from all parts of the world and all periods of history since Adam and Eve, what will be the language of heaven? Or, will there be multiple languages used? Is there a heavenly language? Language is somewhat determined by culture. So, what will be the culture of heaven?

7. God who is the Father of us all and has given us a universal Sabbath intends for us to consider all other human beings as our brothers and sisters.
8. What should we learn from these three Sabbaths: 1) The seventh-day Sabbath, 2) The seventh-year Sabbath, and 3) The jubilee Sabbath? Are there lessons that are appropriate for Christians to learn from these Sabbaths? Could we practice some of the principles of these Sabbaths in our day? Clearly, God intended for these Sabbaths to be a great equalizer. It would make it more difficult for some to accumulate great amounts of wealth or land while others are dirt poor.
9. Read Amos 8:4-7. How many ways do people cheat others in our day? It is hard even to read these words. Merchants were devising all sorts of ways to cheat and abuse the poor people they were dealing with—even on God’s Sabbath. Would it be safe to set the prisoners free today?
10. Read Proverbs 31:8-9. Few of us spend time in public courts. But, can we fulfill the principles implied in these verses? Today, does our legal system guarantee fairness? Do we need to be aware of any abuses that are taking place around us and try to stop them? Of course, we ourselves must not be cheating customers, either rich or poor. How do we care for the needs of the poor in our day? What about their health care? What about criminals and drug addicts?
11. Read Isaiah 1:10-17. (Compare Ezekiel 16 and Matthew 10:14-15 and 11:20-24.) Imagine a young prophet who was actually a member of the royal family, making his first major speech using words like those! There was no question in his mind but that true worship meant caring for widows and orphans and not just a round of meaningless ceremonies. What is the relationship between caring for widows and orphans and worshiping God?
12. We often think of prophets as people who predicted events which were to happen in the future. Clearly, the Old Testament prophets we have looked at already were heavily focused as well on spiritual and moral reform and unselfish service to their fellow human beings. Can you imagine a worse kind of witness than being so busy “worshiping” God that one does not have time to help those in need? Would helping others be a kind of worship? If we were really following the biblical recommendations, the poor would be cared for by the local churches and not be some government program.
13. Read Isaiah 58:1-12. Near the end of his written ministry, Isaiah took up a similar theme. He stated in unequivocal words that the people around him were claiming to be worshiping God and that they were even pretending to enjoy doing it; but, in fact, what God wanted was for them to do what was right. No amount of spiritual worship could take the place of taking care of widows, orphans, and the poor. Were there a lot of widows and orphans because their husbands and fathers were killed in battle? Or, was it from diseases?
14. How well are we doing at reaching out to the hungry, the afflicted, and the poor? Read Acts 20:35. Have you ever had an experience in which you felt that “there is more happiness in giving than in receiving”? Why is that? Do we believe that? Does God touch our lives

when we reach out to help others?

15. We may have the most wonderful kind of religious talk and belief, and it may be based on Scriptures; but, if we are not carrying that belief into our daily practice, how does God feel about us? How are we as a people and as a church showing our Christian love by reaching out to others?

16. Read Psalm 82:3-4. Are we doing what God calls us to do in these verses?

One urban church is in a community plagued by gun violence. In 2011 the clear prophetic voice of its pastor rang out during an urban ministry congress in a large city. Here are sample thoughts found in his speech: “Christians must stop the death march!” Referring to the biblical story of when Jesus stopped the funeral train for the widow of Nain’s son (*Luke 7:11-17*), he explained how the church could not sit idly by while street violence escalated in their community. He asked his audience, “Are we simply a church that stands up to do eulogies? Is it not to ask God, ‘Why do *You* allow suffering?’ God says, ‘Why do *you* allow suffering?’”—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* for Thursday, July 14. [Italic type is in the original.]

17. As members of our church, what opportunities do we have to serve the community? Some churches like the one I belong to actually have feeding programs. Working with several different churches, we manage to feed hundreds even thousands of people per week through a “pantry.” A majority of the people who are given food are men; it is easier for women who have children to get government aid. Why is that? Would volunteering in a pantry be a good way to witness for Jesus?

18. Read Deuteronomy 24:10-22. Notice in these verses that God made it very clear exactly how the Hebrews were to behave in certain situations. God did not leave them with the option of just doing what they thought was right. He reminded them that they had been slaves in Egypt.

19. When we get to heaven, will we all be treated equally and fairly? Will there be rich and poor in heaven? Will there be any class distinctions? If we as Christians are hoping soon to go to heaven, would it be a good thing for us to practice heavenly principles even now? The seventh-day Sabbath was given to all mankind. When Christ died on the cross, He died for everyone.

When the mind of Christ becomes our mind, and His works our works, we shall be able to keep the fast described by the prophet Isaiah: “Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens?” [Isaiah 58:6] Find out what the poor and suffering are in need of, and then, in love and tenderness, help them to courage and hope and confidence by sharing with them the good things that God has given you. Thus you will be doing the very work that the Lord means you to do. “Let the oppressed go free.” Do not rest until you break every yoke. It is not possible for you to neglect this and yet obey God.—Ellen G. White, *Pacific Union Recorder*, July 21, 1904 par. 1; *The Medical Missionary*, June 1, 1891 par. 3. [Content in brackets is added.]

20. So, what could we do that would demonstrate tangible Christianity? Should we be giving money to those who stand on the street corners? In addition to paying our tithes and supporting our local church, should we reach out to other missionary projects we might hear about?

21. The Seventh-day Adventist Church has always done much better at evangelizing the poor and needy than at reaching the wealthier classes. Is that evidence that we are doing what God has asked us to do? Should we be doing better at reaching out to the rich? Is it hard for the rich to feel any need?
22. Why do you suppose there are so many references to the widows, orphans, needy, and poor in the Scriptures? Is that because there were so many of them? How many of the ancient Hebrews were subsistence farmers who depended day by day on what they could raise or get from their animals?
23. Clearly, no matter how well we do, we will never be able to feed all of the world's poor or meet all their needs. So, would it be better for us just to focus on evangelizing as many as possible so that Jesus can come quickly? Then, everyone's needs would be met! Would you agree or disagree with that approach?
24. That has always been a challenging question. People have gone overboard in both directions. Of course, we could never fully solve the world's poverty problems. Apparently, God never intended for us to do so. Is it God's plan that we evangelize by helping the poor? Are we also responsible for trying to reach the rich?
25. Read Acts 20:35 again. Where did Paul get this quotation from Jesus which is not in any other material that we have available to us today. Was it in some written material that we no longer have? Or, did one of the disciples tell Paul about these words from Jesus?
26. Read Matthew 25:40. Do you really see the people in need—the poor and the hungry that you happen to come across—as if they were Jesus? Does that include the people standing on the corners of our streets or those in the parking lots asking for money and food? What about those who might come to ask for help from the Dorcas Society? Or, from a pantry? Or, even directly to the church?

In 1909 Ferdinand and Ana Stahl went as missionaries to the Peruvian Andes. Like many other Seventh-day Adventist missionaries, they started with the tried-and-true method of selling books door to door. The only problem was they were working among a 95-percent indigenous population kept in ignorance and poverty by a religious and political aristocracy. Most of the people couldn't read the books that the Stahls were offering.

So, they changed their approach. They started clinics, markets, chapels, and the first coeducational school in the region. They helped break down racial, religious, and social barriers. Soon there were some two hundred schools dotting Lake Titicaca, with thousands of students enrolled in them.

The legacy of the Stahls has been profound. Many non-Seventh-day Adventist politicians, religious leaders, and educationalists acknowledge the tremendous social impact made by these Seventh-day Adventist missionaries. "In the face of severe injustice, suffering, and oppression," writes Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutierrez, "the Stahls identified with the poorest of the poor and incarnated the gospel in ways which profoundly impacted the spiritual, social, economic, and political life of the Peruvian highlands" (La Sierra University, "Stahl Center," accessed June 9, 2015, <http://lasierra.edu/stahl-center>).—*Adult Teacher's Sabbath School Bible Study Guide*, page 40.

27. Having studied this lesson, how should we feel about getting involved in issues of social justice? Does that seem to you like it should be a priority? Is our Christianity more than just

a formula for future salvation? Do we recognize a real responsibility to the poor and needy who live among us?

28. Read Jeremiah 6:13-15. Do the members of our churches seem more greedy for gain? Or, more concerned about the poor? Do we sometimes “pass by” those who are hurting or hungry as did the Levite and the priest in the story of the good Samaritan? Do we have “no shame at all; they do not even know how to blush.” (Jeremiah 6:15, *NIV*)
29. What would lead God to say: “I hate your religious festivals; I cannot stand them”? (Amos 5:21, *GNB*) In Isaiah 58, we are told to loose the chains of injustice, set the oppressed free, feed the hungry, provide shelter and clothing to the naked. Are we doing that?
30. In the days of Jesus, He accused the religious leaders of straining out gnats while swallowing camels. (See Matthew 23:24.) Are there any areas of our lives where Jesus might say something like that to us today? Are feeding the homeless and caring for the needy just an entering wedge to take the gospel to them so we can save their souls? Or, is there some spiritual calling in just meeting the physical needs of other human beings?

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Info@theox.org

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