

Social Justice in the Prophets

Isaiah 58:1-8 | On religious hypocrisy

¹ Cry aloud; do not hold back;

lift up your voice like a trumpet;
declare to my people their transgression,
to the house of Jacob their sins.

² Yet they seek me daily

and delight to know my ways,
as if they were a nation that did righteousness
and did not forsake the judgment of their God;
they ask of me righteous judgments;
they delight to draw near to God.

³ “Why have we fasted, and you see it not?

Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?”
Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure,
and oppress all your workers.

⁴ Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to hit with a wicked fist.

Fasting like yours this day
will not make your voice to be heard on high.

⁵ Is such the fast that I choose,
a day for a person to humble himself?

Is it to bow down his head like a reed,
and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him?

Will you call this a fast,
and a day acceptable to the LORD?

⁶ Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of wickedness,
to undo the straps of the yoke,

to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?

⁷ Is it not to share your bread with the hungry
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover him,
and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?

⁸ Then shall your light break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up speedily;
your righteousness shall go before you;
the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.

Psalms 146:5-9 | Social Justice

⁵ Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the LORD his God,

⁶ who made heaven and earth,
the sea, and all that is in them,
who keeps faith forever;

⁷ who executes justice for the oppressed,
who gives food to the hungry.

The LORD sets the prisoners free;

⁸ the LORD opens the eyes of the blind.

The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down;
the LORD loves the righteous.

⁹ The LORD watches over the sojourners;
he upholds the widow and the fatherless,
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

Two objections:

(1) Don't people deserve what they have? What about merit?

(2) Won't we create dependency?

Ezekiel 18:5-9 | Comprehensive Righteousness

⁵ If a man is righteous and does what is just and right – ⁶ if he does not eat upon the mountains or lift up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, does not defile his neighbor's wife or approach a woman in her time of menstrual impurity, ⁷ does not oppress anyone, but restores to the debtor his pledge, commits no robbery, gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with a garment, ⁸ does not lend at interest or take any profit, withholds his hand from injustice, executes true justice between man and man, ⁹ walks in my statutes, and keeps my rules by acting faithfully – he is righteous; he shall surely live, declares the Lord GOD.

Amos 5:11-12 | Trampling on the Poor

¹¹ Therefore because you trample on the poor
and you exact taxes of grain from him,
you have built houses of hewn stone,
but you shall not dwell in them;
you have planted pleasant vineyards,
but you shall not drink their wine.

¹² For I know how many are your transgressions
and how great are your sins –
you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe,
and turn aside the needy in the gate.

Amos 8:4-10 | The Wrath of God Against Injustice to the Poor

⁴ Hear this, you who trample on the needy
and bring the poor of the land to an end,
⁵ saying, “When will the new moon be over,
that we may sell grain?
And the Sabbath,
that we may offer wheat for sale,
that we may make the ephah small and the shekel great
and deal deceitfully with false balances,
⁶ that we may buy the poor for silver
and the needy for a pair of sandals
and sell the chaff of the wheat?”

⁷ The LORD has sworn by the pride of Jacob:
“Surely I will never forget any of their deeds.

⁸ Shall not the land tremble on this account,
and everyone mourn who dwells in it,
and all of it rise like the Nile,
and be tossed about and sink again, like the Nile of Egypt?”

⁹ “And on that day,” declares the Lord GOD,
“I will make the sun go down at noon
and darken the earth in broad daylight.

¹⁰ I will turn your feasts into mourning
and all your songs into lamentation;

I will bring sackcloth on every waist
and baldness on every head;

I will make it like the mourning for an only son
and the end of it like a bitter day.”

Isaiah 58 – religious hypocrisy

- people seem pious, devote – “they seek God” (v.2) / they fast (v.3)
- they do all religious things: attend church, pray, fast, look moral
- but God’s judgment is coming on them

Fasting that pleases God

- v. 6 – slavery/imprisonment | image: false imprisonment
- v. 7 explains what is meant by the imagery of v. 6
- poverty of poor is “oppression” / “wicked bonds”
- therefore, to fight such injustice – share and help poor

This biblical concept of “social justice” is radical

- this is not just charity but matter of justice (right and wrong)
- Bible articulates poverty as unjust oppression of the poor
- Bible envisions a world of economic equity

Psalm 146

- echoes same vision as Isaiah 58 | same imagery of imprisonment
- matter of justice to help poor, not just charity

Objections:

(1) Don’t people deserve what they have? | merit argument

- merit is not as clear cut as you think | luck factor
- Psalm 146:9 – sojourners, widows, fatherless (is it there fault?)
- we live by grace | social justice is gospel re-enactment

(2) Won’t we create dependency?

- yes, this is a big problem | therefore, we need to be thoughtful
- because if we create sense of entitlement, person is worse off
- but this can’t be an excuse not to engage!

Ezekiel 18 – comprehensive righteousness

- defines righteousness in traditional terms: sexual purity, no robbery
- but also someone who passionate about social justice
- “restores debtor his pledge” (Exodus 22:26)
- “does not lend at interest” (Exodus 22:25 – usury laws)
- “gives bread to hungry, covers naked with garment”

Amos 5 – trampling on the poor

“exact taxes of grain” | not through criminal acts, but legal means

- unjust taxes? | example: regressive tax vs. progressive tax
- tax breaks for rich (mortgage interest deduction)

Is. 58:3 – “oppress your workers” | fair wage and not just what’s legal

- you have to care about welfare of your employees, not just profit

“build houses of hewn stone”

- cut stone was a very expensive | luxurious homes
- what is Bible saying about luxury?

“turn aside needy in the gate” (v. 12)

- “gate” was law courts of ancient world
- do we have a system where only rich get justice?

Amos 8 – the judgment of God for neglecting social justice

- one principal reasons why Israel went into exile – neglect of poor

“make ephah small and shekel great”

- cheat poor with deceptive pricing, shoddy merchandise
- business practices that exploit ignorance of poor

“sell chaff of wheat”

- chaff is inedible part of grain | cheat poor

“buy poor for silver / pair of sandals”

- take advantage of desperate situation, extract exorbitant profit
- price gouging | legal but exploitative against poor