

A Kingdom of Justice

Micah, Isaiah 1, Amos 5
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Web Description: The Biblical prophets give us strong messages about God's desire to see justice done in His world. In this message we read those challenging passages and learn to understand them and apply them to our lives.

1. Welcome & ushers distribute Bibles
2. Introduction
 - a. Last week read the prophet Isaiah and his God given vision for new creation. We heard Jesus say that promise would come true in him, and we asked ourselves how we could cooperate with God's dream for the world and live now in the kind of world God has promised to create at the end of time.
 - b. Today we need to fill that picture out a little bit. And I want to acknowledge that some of the passages we'll read today have a harsh side. The Biblical prophets sometimes spoke words of peace and comfort to God's people in hard times. But sometimes they spoke hard words in times of peace and comfort. I saw a bumper sticker once that said, "Just because nobody understands you doesn't mean you're an artist." It's true right. I've also heard it said, "Just because they're throwing stones at you doesn't mean you're a prophet." It doesn't, of course, but sometimes the messages of the prophets can be hard for us to listen to. We need to hear these messages, and then I want to try to help us put them in context and apply them to our lives.
3. **What does the Bible say?**
 - a. First passages I want to show you speak to the problem of economic or social injustice.
 - i. **You levy a straw tax on the poor and impose a tax on their grain. Therefore, though you have built stone mansions, you will not live in them; though you have planted lush vineyards, you will not drink their wine. For I know how many are your offenses and how great your sins. There are those who oppress the innocent and take bribes and deprive the poor of justice in the courts. Amos 5:11-12 (p. 1337)**
 - ii. Here's another one that sounds like it might have been written during our 21st century subprime mortgage crisis: **Woe to those who plan iniquity, to those who plot evil on their beds! At morning's light they carry it out because it is in their power to do it. They covet fields and seize them, and houses, and take them. They**

defraud people of their homes, they rob them of their inheritance.

Micah 2:1-2 (p. 1354)

- iii. First point to note on your outline is that **God cares about a just society.**
 - iv. In these passages and others, I think it's important to say that this isn't a Biblical endorsement of any one political party or any one political approach to getting there. I want to say more about this once we read a little more of the Bible and start applying this to our lives. But it's worth saying up front that we're seeing a Biblical vision for godly priorities and godly outcomes, but it isn't an invitation for the church to become a political party.
 - b. The second set of passages take this concern one step further, and makes a connection between the justice we practice and our worship lives.
 - i. Amos says, **"I hate, I despise your religious festivals; your assemblies are a stench to me. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!"**
Amos 5:21-24 (p. 1337)
 - ii. Isaiah says, **Your New Moon feasts and your appointed festivals I hate with all my being. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands in prayer, I hide my eyes from you; even when you offer many prayers, I am not listening. Your hands are full of blood! Wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight; stop doing wrong. Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow.** **Isaiah 1:14-17 (p. 988)**
 - iii. Here's the second point you might note on your outlines. **God doesn't want our worship without our obedience.** Major contrast to many of us who have been trained to think that as long as God has our worship, he doesn't care about our obedience.
4. **What does this mean?** How should we understand these demands?
- a. The first thing we need to remember and understand from these passages is that God never starts with his law. We learned that earlier in the Big God Story. Even when God gave the Ten Commandments, His first word was "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt." We have a relationship with God because of God's love and grace for us before we have anything else in that relationship.

- i. The same message appears in the prophets. We heard a reading from the prophet Micah read during worship this morning. Micah said that what God requires of us is to do justice and love mercy and so forth. That passage is the conclusion of an imaginary conversation between God and Israel. And before the passage finishes by saying what God requires, it begins by saying what God has already done. Micah reminded Israel of this. **My people, what have I done to you? How have I burdened you? Answer me. I brought you up out of Egypt and redeemed you from the land of slavery. I sent Moses to lead you, also Aaron and Miriam. Micah 6:3-4 (p. 1359)**
- ii. Please note this on your outlines: **God's salvation is first.** God says, I rescued you first. So this isn't a legalism. If you finally get your act together, then God will want a relationship with you. That's just not how it works here.
- b. The second thing to recognize is that these demands of justice are just the other side of the promises we heard last week. God promised that in his new creation there would be peace and justice in his world. He promised that those who build houses would get to live in houses; those who labor would get to enjoy the fruit of their labor. We all want to live in a world like that, and nobody wants it more than God. The next point on your outline is this: **God won't settle for less.** God won't settle for less than his promise. He can't stand a world that hurts you. He's going to redeem His creation in Jesus Christ, and He wants us to cooperate with that plan now.
- c. And finally, it's important for us to know that **God's real plan is to restore and not destroy.** God doesn't want to destroy Israel. He wants to turn them around.
 - i. Micah 7 promises that Israel will return from the exile into which God is going to send them. Even though you're going to pay for your sins, I'm going to bring you back. **The day for building your walls will come, the day for extending your boundaries. In that day people will come to you from Assyria and the cities of Egypt, even from Egypt to the Euphrates and from sea to sea and from mountain to mountain. Micah 7:11-12 (p. 1362)**
 - ii. And ultimately, God promises to send a Savior. We're only a week away from Christmas and the celebration that God kept that promise. Micah 5 says, **But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans^[m] of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times." Micah 5:2**

iii. The one who was born in Bethlehem was, of course, Jesus. And when Jesus' mother found out that she would bear the child who would be our Savior, she sang a song. She sang a song that praised God for keeping these promises, for finally sending the one who would bring justice and peace to God's people and God's world. Traditionally her song has been called the Magnificat, because she magnified God's name, she praised God for keeping this promise.

5. How can we respond?

a. **We can respond individually.** It may mean two different things – maybe at different times, maybe for different people, maybe both at the same time. Each of us needs to listen for God's word and God's Spirit to speak to our hearts on this.

i. It's a word of hope that God cares about you when others don't. Most people in this world don't care about you. You are a tool in maximizing profit and comfort for someone else. That's not true in the case of God. He sees you. He hears you. And he cares.

ii. It may also be a call to a kind of repentance. It is a call to care about other people like God does and not like the world does. If you find that God's concern about a just society is not a priority in your heart, this passage says you need some new priorities. If you find that you are giving God your worship, but not your obedience, then these passages are a call to a change of heart and behavior. – So we can respond individually, but I'm not sure that the Bible is speaking to us first of all as individuals in this case. It's also speaking to us as a community, and so the second way that we can respond is corporately...

b. **We can respond corporately.**

i. As a church community and as a society, the Bible teaches us to make a priority of economic justice. Again, I have to be clear about this because there's the opportunity for misunderstanding. The Bible doesn't say whether solutions on the political left or political right will get us the kind of results that God wants to see. In fact, I think we have responded to these passages politically before, and we usually make one of two mistakes. Sometimes we have quoted these passages in a concern for social justice that leaves God out and is no longer recognizably Christian. While we can be glad when political or social leaders care about justice, as a church we can and must remember that this is part of God's plan and it is what Jesus came to fulfill. But other times we have

abused these passages not by removing them from their context but by removing them from our concern. We have simply ignored them and thus ignored a real part of God's word to us. So while some of us have read these passages and made them godless, others of us have read these passages and made them pointless. We can do better than that. As God's people in the name of Jesus Christ, we have every reason to gather the best wisdom we can and work together as hard we can to serve God's dream in the world we live in here and now.

- c. **We can respond hopefully.** And our hope is born of humility. You heard what Micah said, "What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love mercy, *and* to walk humbly with your God." We are humble because we know that God is the one who is going to make this world right, not us. We can't do it. But He can and He will. God sent the Savior from Bethlehem, and He has lived and worked among us, and He is coming back again. God has not just demanded a new world, He has promised one, and all God's promises are Yes in Jesus Christ.

PRAY