

Justice *and* Mercy in the Old Testament: Part 1



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Exod. 22:21–23, 23:2–9, Amos 8:4–7, Isa. 1:13–17, 58:1–14, Acts 20:35.*

Memory Text: “He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets prisoners free, the LORD gives sight to the blind, the LORD lifts up those who are bowed down, the LORD loves the righteous. The LORD watches over the foreigner and sustains the fatherless and the widow” (*Psalms 146:7–9, NIV*).

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>.

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. 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.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 16.

Mercy and Justice: Earmarks of God’s People

Even in early Israel, social justice was very much a part of God’s laws and His ideal for His people. Justice is God’s original intention for human society: a world in which basic needs are met, people flourish, and peace reigns.

Read the following texts and summarize what they say about mercy and justice. *Exod. 22:21–23, 23:2–9, Lev. 19:10, Prov. 14:31, 29:7.*

Mercy and justice also are highlighted in the Sabbath laws given to ancient Israel. God outlined three types of Sabbaths.

How is the idea of mercy and justice reflected in each of these Sabbaths? *Exod. 20:8–10; 23:10, 11; Lev. 25:8–55.*

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.

Here, in the very fabric of Hebrew society, we can see how justice and mercy worked together in favor of the less fortunate in society.

Universal Concerns

Read Genesis 2:1–3. What does this tell us about the universality of the Sabbath?

If we truly observe the Sabbath, we will not remain satisfied with only our own rest (*Exod. 23:12*), redemption (*Deut. 5:12–15*), and ultimate restoration in the new earth (*Isa. 66:22, 23*). Indeed, the seventh-day Sabbath tells us that God is the Creator and Rest Provider of all who live on this earth. The universality of the Sabbath rest implies a commonality among all of us, rich or poor. The common Fatherhood of God means a common equality and concern among human beings.

Also, as we saw yesterday, the concern for justice extends from weekly Sabbaths to sabbatical years and to the year of jubilee. The principles behind the three Sabbaths portrayed in Leviticus 23 and 25 extend to Christians as well. The seventh-day Sabbath will forever point back to Creation, as well as forward to the Cross and new earth. It will strengthen our relationship with our compassionate Creator and Savior, thus bringing us closer to the ones He deeply loves—people who have deep needs, who are poor or suffering.

Please note, however, that the Sabbath year and the year of jubilee illustrate eternal principles, but this doesn't mean that we are to literally observe these festivals now. We aren't. Unlike the seventh-day Sabbath, which was instituted at the Creation in a pre-Fall world, these are among the ceremonial Sabbaths that were a "shadow of things to come" (*Col. 2:16, 17*), pointing forward to the ministry and sacrifice of Jesus and then ending with His death on the cross. Instead, these ceremonial Sabbaths point to a principle in regard to how we should treat others, especially those in need. As a redeemed people, Israel had an obligation to be a light to the world, showing forth God's mercy to others with no partiality. With thanksgiving they were to represent God's character to those who didn't know Him.

Read Amos 8:4–7. What was going on here, and how can we make sure that we, in our dealings with others, aren't guilty of doing the same thing? What significance do you find, given the context, in the words, " 'Surely I will never forget any of their works' "?

Prophetic Voice: Part 1

“Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy” (Prov. 31:8, 9, NIV).

How do we take the principles here and apply them for today?

So far this week we have noted that God wants His people to express His characteristics of mercy and justice as part of the ideal behavior of His people. The Hebrew prophets often spoke up on behalf of the needy, calling God’s people to repentance for misrepresenting His concern for the marginalized and oppressed. In fact, God equates selfless redemptive behavior with true worship.

Read Isaiah 1:13–17. What does this pronouncement say about God’s definition of true worship? How can we take what is said here, in this immediate context, and apply it to ourselves today? That is, what should these verses say to us now?

Though, of course, many of the Old Testament prophets pointed to future events beyond their lifetimes, they also heavily focused on spiritual and moral reform and unselfish service in the present. The prophetic voice of God’s servants rang loudest when His people made extravagant efforts to worship but did not reflect God’s compassion for the suffering of those around them. One can’t imagine a worse witness than those who are too busy “worshipping” God that they don’t have time to help those in need. Might not a form of “worship” be revealed by those who are serving the Lord by ministering to the needs of others?

Prophetic Voice: Part 2

Isaiah 58 provides a special prophetic message of rebuke and hope for God's people in Isaiah's time and for us today.

After an announcement that He is upset with His people (see *Isa. 58:1*), what is God's description of those He is addressing? Read *Isaiah 58:2*.

Though we don't know the exact "tone of voice" expressed here, it is clear that the Lord is condemning their outward shows of piety and faith because He knows how false it all is. The NIV translates it like this: " 'For day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God' " (*Isa. 58:2, NIV*).

Read *Isaiah 58:3–14*. What else is the Lord saying to these people about what's wrong with their religious forms (in this case fasting)? What's the bigger issue here?

Notice something crucial here: so often worship can be self-centered: *Lord, do this for me and do that for me*. And, of course, there's a time and place for seeking the Lord for our own personal needs. But what the Lord is saying here is that true worship will include reaching out to "the hungry," to "the afflicted," and to the "poor." But the amazing thing is that this ministry to others blesses not only the recipients of the help but those giving the help. Read what the texts say about what happens to those who reach out and help those who are in need. In ministering to others, in giving to others, we get blessed ourselves. Who hasn't, at some point, experienced to some degree the reality of these promises from God? Who hasn't seen what joy and satisfaction and hope come to those who help others who can't help themselves? It's hard to imagine a better way to reflect the character of Christ to the world.

Read Acts 20:35. How have you experienced the reality of these words in your own ministry to others?

A Force for Good

Having the truth, however wonderful, is not enough. In Isaiah 58, God’s people were passionate about their religious forms and practices and yet weak in applying their faith in a practical manner. God is calling His church today to be a force for good, echoing the call of the Old Testament prophets to demonstrate the truth about His character.

Read the following texts. How can we, as a local church and as a world church, seek to do what we have been called by God to do in this area?

Ps. 82:3 _____

Isa. 1:17 _____

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.’”

This church also is very active in community development. For seven years, the church choir went to the streets of their community. They sang, passed out fliers, and offered the services of the church to those who had needs. From this contact with their community, the church helped their neighborhood in numerous ways that greatly benefited those in need. Through various and numerous programs, the church made a big difference in the community.

This church is just one example of the many ways that we as a church body can be a ministering and healing force in our communities.

What can your church do to help the needy in your community?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Law Given to Israel,” pp. 307–314; “God’s Care for the Poor,” pp. 530–536, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*.

The concepts of justice and mercy are seen all through the Old Testament. Look at, for instance, Deuteronomy 24:10–22. Look at the specific instructions given in these cases. We can see so clearly the Lord’s concern for the poor, for the workers, for those in debt. This concern is expressed not merely in abstract and lofty language about care for the less fortunate; instead, at least here, it also is expressed in concrete and practical instructions on what to do and what not to do in specific instances, such as with someone in debt or with a poor worker. These concepts were too important to be left totally to one’s own personal notions of what justice and benevolence were. Notice, too, how the Lord referred them back to where they had once been, to when they certainly were among the less fortunate. “Remember that you were slaves in Egypt. That is why I command you to do this” (*Deut. 24:22, NIV*). As Christians, regardless of our financial situation, we must always remember the grace and unmerited favor God has bestowed upon us. Thus, out of the richness and fullness of what we have in Christ (*Eph. 3:19, Col. 2:10*), we need to be ready to serve and help those who need our service and help.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 How does the fourth commandment’s saying that servants should rest on the Sabbath help reveal the idea of the equality of all humanity before the Lord? How, too, should that help us to understand in general how we should justly treat those who work for us or those who are under our control to some degree? Also, how does the universality of what Christ did on the cross reveal even more greatly the equality of all human beings before God?
- 2 “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?’ [Isa. 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.” —Ellen G. White, in *Pacific Union Recorder*, July 21, 1904. How do we do this? That is, how do we share what we have been given in Christ but do so in tangible ways that can truly help those in need?

Dismissed but Determined: Part 3

by ISAIAH MALEK GARANG, South Sudan

The night before my baptism, I had a dream. I saw myself standing on an earth that was clean and bright. I looked up and saw a ladder reaching from the ground to the sky. People were running from all directions and climbing the ladder. They were singing, “We can never stop following Jesus, for we are marching to heaven.” The ladder was full of people singing this song. Then I watched myself climb the ladder. I awoke suddenly and sat up, wondering if I was still alive. Then I knelt to thank God for the wonderful lesson and courage He had given me.

I was baptized in a river near the pastor’s home. Shortly afterward, I was invited to work as a volunteer with Global Mission. I enjoyed this work for three months, but I realized that I needed to return to my wife and the small congregations I had left behind. I told my team leader of my decision and expressed my hope that God would bring these new believers into the church as He had me.

I returned home and visited the eight groups that were meeting in my former pastoral district. They had continued worshiping on Sabbath and were eager to hear what I’d learned during my absence. Most of them accepted the Adventist message and were baptized. My wife was one of the first to be baptized. How thrilled I am to have her stand by me in this new ministry. Even the priest who was dismissed with me so many months earlier took his stand and asked to join the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

As a result of my being dismissed from my former church, today we have about 355 members in 13 Adventist churches, companies, and groups in my region of South Sudan. I minister to the very people I had ministered to as a priest in my former church.

Our work is not easy. Some of our churches have been torn down during the night, with only piles of rubble left in their place. But even these setbacks have been a blessing, as we simply rebuild and invite the destroyers to join us for worship. It is difficult to make inroads in new areas, but we work hard, and God is blessing.

Thank you for partnering with us in southern Sudan to finish the work God has for us here.

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The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Isaiah 1:13–17*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Recognize the importance in God’s eyes of proper care for those on the margins of society: the poor, orphans, widows, immigrants.

Feel: Experience empathy for those in the community who are struggling with challenging circumstances.

Do: Show Christlike compassion for those in need, demonstrated not just in kind words but in practical care.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: For the Least of These

A Why are there so many references to the poor and suffering in the Scriptures?

B Shouldn’t our major focus be on hastening the coming of Christ, during which all injustice will be brought to an end? Wouldn’t we be better off spending our time preaching the gospel rather than advocating and working for the poor and marginalized? Agree or disagree? Explain.

II. Feel: More Blessed

A In Acts 20:35 Paul says that we must help the weak, and then he quotes Jesus: “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” In what ways is it more blessed? Describe your feelings when you help someone who is less fortunate than you are.

III. Do: Inasmuch as You Have Done . . .

A Jesus said that when we help those who are poor and suffering, we are helping Him (*Matt. 25:40*). What do you think would happen if this week, when you see someone in need, you pictured that person as Jesus?

B Look for some service opportunity in which you can provide regular, practical help to someone who is struggling in your community.

► **Summary:** It was never God’s intention that human beings would suffer—that there would be poverty, loneliness, pain, brokenness. But faced with that reality, He has called on us—His followers—to help care for those on the margins.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Isaiah 1:17*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: God has a special place in His heart for the marginalized and the suffering. He calls on His followers to place care for these people high on their agenda.

Just for Teachers: In the book of Isaiah, the sins mentioned again and again are the mistreatment of widows, orphans, immigrants, and the poor. Of course, Isaiah also talks about personal sins of morality, but the temptation for us as Christians is to focus only on these sins and ignore systems that are in place that marginalize and discriminate. Take the opportunity this week to explore with your class why social justice issues should be important to us as Christ's followers.

Opening Discussion: 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>).

Consider This: Discuss with your class the extent to which Seventh-day Adventists should be involved in issues of social justice.

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: Many people think that Christianity is all about

getting people to heaven. While this is central to the good news, it is not the full story. Take the opportunity to help your class discover how much of Jesus’ teaching, and Scripture in general, is devoted to our responsibility to care for the poor and suffering.

Encourage your class to see that Christianity is more than just a formula for future salvation. It’s also a call to demonstrate God’s transforming love now through social responsibility for the poor and for the marginalized in our communities.

Bible Commentary

I. Empty Ritual (Review with your class Isaiah 1:11–17 and Jeremiah 6:13–15.)

Old Testament prophets such as Isaiah spoke with passion and anger about social injustice. But their concern wasn’t just that God’s supposed people were mistreating, or at best overlooking, orphans, widows, and immigrants. They were particularly upset that it was accompanied by phony religiosity, empty ritual, and spiritual hypocrisy. It’s bad enough to mistreat the vulnerable, but to do it in the name of religion made it doubly worse.

This is a theme that runs throughout the Bible. Jeremiah was angry that even God’s supposed prophets and priests—from whom you would expect a higher standard of behavior—were “greedy for gain” and deceitful (*Jer. 6:13, NIV*). But even more distressing for Jeremiah was that they showed no embarrassment about their behavior: “No, they have no shame at all; they do not even know how to blush” (*Jer. 6:15, NIV*).

Isaiah pictures a God who is sick of empty religious ritual: “ ‘I have more than enough of burnt offerings. . . . Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. . . . I cannot bear your worthless assemblies. Your New Moon feasts and your appointed festivals I hate’ ” (*Isa. 1:11–14, NIV*). Amos echoes this theme. “ ‘I hate, I despise your feast days, and I do not savor your sacred assemblies’ ” (*Amos 5:21, NKJV*).

In Isaiah 58, we learn that God was sick of meaningless pious fasting. The kind of fasting He was interested in was:

1. Loosing chains of injustice (*Isa. 58:6*).
2. Setting the oppressed free (*Isa. 58:6*).
3. Feeding the hungry (*Isa. 58:7*).
4. Providing shelter (*Isa. 58:7*).
5. Clothing the naked (*Isa. 58:7*).

Evidence suggests that Isaiah was part of the Jewish aristocracy. He had well-connected friends and access to the royal palace. But he was most concerned for those on the margins—prisoners, immigrants, orphans, widows, the poor. “ ‘Learn to do good,’ ” he thunders. “ ‘Seek justice, rebuke the oppressor; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow’ ” (*Isa. 1:17, NKJV*).

Many hundreds of years later, Jesus continued to strip away the pious veneer of religiosity from those who ignored social injustice. “ ‘Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites!’ ” He said. “ ‘You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin’ ” (*Matt. 23:23, NIV*). The Pharisees were strict on the letter of the law. They tithed everything in their gardens, no doubt even sprigs of parsley. “ ‘But,’ ” Jesus added, “ ‘you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former.’ ” To drive home His point, Jesus added, “ ‘You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel’ ” (*Matt. 23:24, NIV*).

Consider This: Again and again the Old Testament prophets speak on behalf of orphans, widows, immigrants, and other vulnerable members of society. Why do you think God was so concerned specifically with these groups of people? How high on the agenda of your local church are the needs of these people?

■ *Jesus accused the religious leaders of straining out gnats while swallowing camels. Can you suggest any areas in which we might be tempted to do the same today?*

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: Some Seventh-day Adventists get nervous when social issues are discussed. They feel that it is somehow less important than the “spiritual” calling we have to save people’s “souls.” They admit the importance of things such as health and medical work but see it mainly as an “entering wedge” for the gospel. Take the opportunity to explore these issues in the light of biblical counsel from this week’s lesson. Make sure you steer the class away from just sharing personal opinions, and invite them to support their suggestions from the Bible.

Thought Questions:

① Invite the class to discuss this statement: “Caring for people’s physical needs isn’t just preparing the way for the gospel; it’s an essential part of the gospel.”

② Seventh-day Adventists reject the Platonic separation of human body and soul. What implications should this have for the way we relate to people’s physical and spiritual needs? What connection is there between our wholistic view

of human nature and our extensive education, medical, religious liberty, and humanitarian work?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Encourage the class to think about what activities of religious people today might upset God. Leave time at the end of the activity to turn the focus toward the positive—what behavior pleases God.

Activity: In preparation for this activity, print out the following on pieces of paper to hand to each class member:

“ ‘I have more than enough of _____. . . . Stop bringing _____! Your _____ is detestable to me. . . . I cannot bear your _____. Your _____ and your _____ my soul hates.’ ”

If you don't have access to a computer and printer, you can write this amended text out on a blackboard or whiteboard or on a large piece of cardboard or paper or just discuss.

Step 1. Read together with the class Isaiah 1:11–14.

Step 2. Invite the class to consider what God might say today on this theme.

Step 3. Depending on the size of the class and the materials you have, you can:

- A. Give a sheet of paper to each person to fill in the blanks.
- B. Divide the class into smaller groups to fill in the blanks together.
- C. Discuss possibilities for the blanks together as an entire class using a board or sheet of cardboard.

Step 4. Come together as a class to discuss the different answers people have given.

Step 5. Leave time at the end to conclude on a positive note by discussing what behavior today would please God.