

WHY JUSTICE?

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By Jim Jordal

I hate, I despise your feasts, And I can't stand your solemn assemblies. Yes, though you offer me your burnt offerings and meal offerings, I will not accept them; Neither will I regard the peace offerings of your fat animals. Take away from me the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like rivers, And righteousness like a mighty stream.

Amos 5:21-24 WEB

Why should Christians consider the subject of justice in all its forms when there are so many other important issues like salvation, personal health, family unity, church survival, and scores of other important things to think about? Why get caught up in something only leaders should consider, and that's often too difficult for lay people anyway? And besides, it's usually far distant from us and almost never appears on our personal radar screens.

Christians should consider issues of justice because the absence of justice threatens in varying degrees everything we hold dear in life. We should consider justice because God thinks it's important enough to pervade the entirety of Scripture. It is the major theme of Old Testament Law, biblical history, writings of the prophets, ministry of Jesus, Pauline epistles, and the terror and promise of Revelations. The universal message of the Bible concerns the failed human search for justice and how God offers it freely to us if we will only accept and obey his word.

Whether or not we have peace, prosperity, safety, opportunity, medical care, shelter and even food is quite dependent upon the application of justice by those who hold power in society. When institutions providing these necessities become subverted by powerful forces seeking only their own welfare we fall into serious danger of losing what we most value. That's why justice is important.

So why are we so reluctant to seriously consider this issue if God thinks it's vital to our welfare? Ignorance and tradition are the two forces that come first to mind. We don't know what Scripture says on this subject because we don't hear it preached and celebrated in our churches. If we do hear of it we hear only the words, not the behaviors of justice. It's as if the modern church has condensed faith in God down to a three-fold crutch of doctrinal correctness, personal piety, and sexual purity. Nothing else seems to matter.

And then there's the role of excessive tradition in avoiding God's commands regarding justice for the earth.

History is developmental in nature, meaning that as time passes we face new problems and new opportunities. But when tradition becomes the main reason for church existence we lose much of the ability to identify new responses to the multitude of critical issues now facing us.

In the reading above Amos identifies rather well the costs of failing to administer justice in our societal institutions, including churches. God says he doesn't want our worship or sacrifices unless they are accompanied by outpourings of justice and righteousness. And don't even think about attempting to separate justice and righteousness---they are different aspects of the same thing. Righteousness might best be defined in the religious sense as right relationships with God, human beings, and creation. And that is also what justice is about: right relationships with all God's creation in social interactions, economic policy, political activity, and the just application of military force.

When we refuse God's thousands of clear commands for justice in society we create a situation where God no longer responds favorably to our attempts at religious worship and praise. As Amos says, our attempts to please God with worshipful songs, rituals, and creeds become nothing more than unpleasant noise in his ears and bad smells in his nostrils unless accompanied by overflowing justice and crusading righteousness.

What's needed now is for us to realize that there has never before been a time when it was more necessary to teach, preach, and act on issues of biblical justice in our places of worship. Nothing matters more.