



DO JUSTICE

Our Call to Faithful Living

Edited by Nathan Brown and Joanna Darby

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OUR CALL TO DO JUSTICE

Foreword

When Jesus came to Earth, He came so that we might get to know the Father and the true character of God. We needed to understand that God is a God of compassion, of love, of justice and of mercy. You see, all of those characteristics flow freely from the heart of God.

As such, justice also stands at the heart of Christianity. According to James, “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world” (**James 1:27**, NIV). Over and over again, the Bible calls us to care for vulnerable groups of people who live in our society: orphans, widows, immigrants and the poor. Today, we could extend this to include other vulnerable groups such as the elderly, the unemployed, the trafficked, the child slave or refugees.

Why should we care about these people? The answer is simple: God is concerned about them. God is the defender of the vulnerable and the weak. And we are called to be, too.

When Jesus left, it was His vision that we—His church—would continue to be that vision of God. That we would protect the vulnerable and do good toward others. That our hearts would become shaped like His, overflowing with compassion and mercy. We cannot stop at just knowing that God’s character is just, we must act in a way that is reflective of that. As Philip Gourevitch has artfully said, “Denouncing evil is a far cry from doing good.”

As individuals who make up God’s church, we must put our hands and feet to work for justice in this world. No-one else will do it for us. We must take the challenge Micah leaves us: “He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (**Micah 6:8**, NIV).

Sometimes we feel like there’s nothing we can do as individuals to make a difference in this dark and broken world. But the truth is we can. We must

find a voice to speak out for justice and represent the character of God. We must find ways—creatively and boldly—to act in our local communities and across the world to help up the downtrodden, serving them as we would serve Jesus Himself (see **Matthew 25:37–40**).

As I have opportunity to travel around the world, I am often confronted by “man’s inhumanity toward man” but I am also inspired by the difference individuals are making in response to these tragedies and injustices. I have come to the conclusion that we can influence the world if we are willing to speak out and act for justice.

We can talk about what the church should do—and the church as a body does have a role to play—but if we accept that the church is made up of people, and that I am one of those people, then how can I live my life in a way that actually demonstrates justice and mercy?

As you read this book, my desire is that you would grow toward spiritual awareness of how we can best represent the heart of God in the midst of a world that is full of injustice. The weight of evidence in the Bible is that doing justice is a significant part of what faithful living looks like. I pray that we will think of ways to faithfully, creatively and consistently live justice so others might see the love of God in action.

Jonathan Duffy

President

Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) International

WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE (TRY TO) TALK ABOUT JUSTICE

Introduction

If there's anything hotter than a humid morning in the height of a Queensland summer, it's spending it in a camp-meeting tent. The air barely moved and the green canvas created a monstrous oven, meaning we were feeling the heat even before we began speaking.

This was an important opportunity. We had been talking about this workshop for months, planning a different approach to presenting some of the theology of justice, as well as some of the practical ways we can live out our call to do justice.

Preparations were done, including setting out briefing sheets, writing pads, pens and boxes to collect letters for Amnesty International cases around the world at the end of our workshop. And now we waited nervously for the group of young people to arrive.

The previous session wrapped up and some of the participants found their way to our workshop, each with their different stories, cultures and experiences. Drawn from across the South Pacific region, we were talking to people from both developing and over-developed countries, with perhaps as many as a dozen nations, with many more ethnicities and language groups represented. We were excited about the possibilities of this group of young people deepening their understanding of biblical justice and catching the vision of changing their world.

Almost two hours later, we had talked—a lot. We had talked Bible and theology. We had talked about issues of injustice and poverty in the world and positive progress that is being made to address some of these around the world. We had talked development and economics. We had talked about our responses and we had talked about strategies for making change. We had talked . . . for a very long time.

As well as discussing some of the practical things that could be done after

they left the Youth Congress gathering, we invited the young people to stay behind to write letters on behalf of a prisoner of conscience somewhere in the world, using the Amnesty International briefing sheets and templates. We offered to post the letters, if the participants would just spare a few minutes of their congress experience on behalf of someone somewhere else in the world.

It seemed a good idea. But it was still unbearably hot and uncomfortable in that tent. And the session had run late and it was already time for lunch, so very few stayed to write letters.

We chatted briefly and encouraged those few who remained as we packed up. One by one, the few letter writers dropped their folded pieces of paper into the box. Then those last workshop participants drifted away and our morning's work was done.

We briefly reviewed the workshop, considering some of the positive feedback and conversations we'd had with participants at the end of the session. Packing up the letter-writing station, two of the letters caught our attention and pulled us out of our oven-baked post-workshop fug. Written independently by two people from two different Pacific nations, these letters were addressed to us—the people talking so much and so boldly about justice-doing. The letters described the poverty and injustice issues that these two people were each experiencing in their respective home villages.

For all our talk of justice, we felt all but helpless—even a little foolish—in the face of the real injustice experienced by some of those who had sat in front of us for the previous couple of hours. And all our enthusiasm and good intentions seemed kind of wilted in the midday heat of the now-empty tent. It's easy to feel "righteous" when talking about justice. Perhaps even more so when we are **only** talking about it. While urging the importance of justice-doing in our understanding and expression of faith, we must resist the temptations to any sense of superiority.

Perhaps that's why "walking humbly" is the vital third leg of **Micah 6:8**. Doing justice and loving mercy must be seasoned with humility. The enormity and outrage of poverty and injustice in our world must keep us grounded—and keep us reaching up to ensure we are truly "walking humbly with our God."

Anything less will destroy us and hurt others, however well intentioned we might try to be.

Yet, despite the near-overwhelming scale of injustice, it is always surpassed by the magnitude of justice. As urged by Steven Thompson in the opening chapter of this book, the Bible's call to do justice is big and much repeated. But equally huge is the import and meaning of *justice*—in so many Bible verses, a legitimate alternative to the word *righteousness* often rendered in older translations of the Bible. If we wanted to distil it into an even simpler term, we might simply say *rightness*.

This is what we talk about when we try to talk about justice. Doing justice is a call to join with God in setting the world right, restoring broken relationships to the original intention of creation, enacting the kingdom of God as inaugurated by Jesus and, in so doing, proclaiming and anticipating the coming completion of His kingdom. With particular concern—as directed by the Bible itself—for the poor, the oppressed, the marginalised and the suffering. Thus, justice is a many-faceted work of faithful, intentional, practical creativity and goodness, lived in partnership with God and community with others.

This is one reason we have invited so many good people to share their passion, insights and experiences in the chapters of this book. As we have edited these chapters, we have been inspired and encouraged by their knowledge, their stories, their perspectives and their faith. They each write from their societies and cultures, reflected in the issues and examples they cite, but informing how we might respond to specific justice issues in our own places in the world. Thank you to each of our contributors for what you have shared with us in this book but also what each chapter represents of your life, ministry, voice, influence, service and justice-doing.

Thank you also for those who contributed chapters that did not make it into the final book. If only by these omissions—some of the most difficult decisions in the editing process—this book is an incomplete survey of the Bible's call to do justice and how we go about it. In a collection of this nature, there will be overlaps and gaps, some repetition and something (different) that each reader will notice missing. Please consider the gaps you notice as an invitation to share your passion for justice, your favourite of the more than 2100 Bible verses on justice, your stories of injustice done or justice

restored, your voice of faithful, prophetic protest in a world of injustice and poverty.

Among the published contributors to this project are a number of people connected with the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA), either currently or in the past. ADRA has been a significant factor in our talking about injustice and poverty. We have both had opportunities to work on projects with ADRA, and to witness the work and people of ADRA in different places around the world. As a result, we and our families are ongoing ADRA supporters.

But we are also grateful for the support of ADRA for this book project. Mark Webster and Braden Blyde—both of ADRA Australia—were part of the initial planning for this book, and other members of the ADRA Australia team have encouraged the book's development. Thanks particularly to a retired ADRA Australia veteran Harwood Lockton. As well as his chapter contribution, Harwood has been a wise reader of the chapters as they have come together and has advised us through much of the necessary wrestling of this process. This book is much better for his attention.

Thanks to those who have otherwise contributed to the development and production of this book, including the people of Signs Publishing and Adventist Media Network.

Thank you to our respective spouses, who share our understanding of God's call to justice and whose practical work in their respective communities often put our big ideas about justice in the shade. While we talk and write about justice, they often seem to be busy doing justice, working in their communities, connecting with people in ways that matter. You inspire us and keep us grounded, at the same time as continuing to encourage our talking and writing.

Nonetheless, we remain sobered and informed by the "letters" we received that muggy day in Queensland. Of course, it hasn't stopped us talking about justice—the reality of injustice makes these conversations, sermons and workshops all the more important and necessary. But it tempers any pretensions we might have about "expert" status, calling us back to that vital humility. And it is in this spirit that this book is offered.

In the face of sometimes overwhelming injustice, we are saddened and

humbled. In meeting and hearing from those who work to overcome injustice far more directly than we, we are inspired and humbled. In recognising God's heart for and identification with those who suffer injustice, we are ever humbled—and called again to humble partnership with Jesus in bringing Kingdom come. We are honoured to journey alongside our neighbours, both nearby and around the world, in sharing expressions of God's hope.

In these pages, may those who suffer injustice be reminded that God sees, hears and cares about their suffering and calls His people to act. And may we hear—and hear again—this call to faithful, just, humble living.

Nathan Brown and Joanna Darby

FOUNDATIONAL

THE STRAND OF JUSTICE

Justice and the Bible

Steven Thompson

The Bible has been used to justify slavery and the occupation of other people's land. It has been used to deny children vaccinations, blood transfusions and hospital treatment. It contains commands to carry out what amounts to ethnic cleansing. Many of its stories seem stories of injustice. But what place does justice have in the Bible? Is there really enough justice in the Bible?

One common objection to the Bible as a guide to justice is the command to destroy the Canaanites who lived in the land promised to the Israelites: "You shall utterly destroy them" (**Deuteronomy 7:2**). How could a God of justice call for such destruction? But every text has a context, including Bible texts.

A quick look at the context will show, first, that these words are not God's; they are the words of Moses. While God often spoke through Moses, not every word spoken by Moses was from God. Second, within this speech, Moses twice states that God, not the Israelites, will move the peoples rather than slaughter them: "Yahweh your God will clear away these seven nations" (**verses 1 and 22**). Third, God will do it with hornets! "Furthermore, there are the hornets which the Lord your God will send against them" (**verse 20**). Fourth, the process of clearing away the nations would take a long time, "little by little. You must not make an end of them quickly" (**verse 22**). Fifth, "God will confuse them with a great confusion" (**verse 23**).

When read in context, even this apparent command to violence loses most of its force. While context may not neutralise all the Bible's apparently violent commands, it gives readers a new viewpoint. They may, for example, ask, "Whose land was it, anyway? Did those seven nations come to occupy it justly? Or was God gently displacing them in just response to an earlier injustice?"

Yet justice runs like a strand of a cord through the Bible's heart. It appears

repeatedly in laws and stories, in both Old and New Testaments. The very stories of injustice help highlight the Bible's core focus on justice. In spite of—and even because of the injustice in some of its stories—it offers guidance for anyone wanting to understand justice, especially to anyone wanting to practice it.

The source of justice

Where does justice come from? Did it emerge “naturally” as humans evolved from lower forms of life as a survival tactic, as Charles Darwin theorised?¹ Or did “justice” emerge from the shifting, unstable truce between the empowered minority and the disempowered majority, as suggested by Plato's imaginary sophist Thrasymachus?²

Ancient Israelites did not believe justice sprang from social necessity among evolving humans. Nor was it invented by strong humans to justify their control of the weak. They were convinced that justice is part of the nature of God. If there were no God, there would be no justice. Since God exists and justice is part of His nature, justice exists! It was that simple. Justice as part of God's nature is expressed in many ways in the sacred scriptures of the ancient Israelites, the Hebrew Bible, also known as the Old Testament.³ The Lord is God of justice, according to **Isaiah 30:19** and **Malachi 2:17**. God loves justice, according to **Psalms 33:5**. Yahweh is a God of justice (see **Isaiah 30:18**).

The Israelites developed word pictures to great effect to depict God as the source of justice. Readers of the Old Testament “get the picture” of the importance of the message that justice comes from God. Thrones and throne rooms were effective symbols for power in the world of ancient Israel. The throne itself, as well as the ruler sitting on it, spoke of power and authority. Psalm writers tapped into this forceful image when they wrote, “Righteousness and justice are foundations of your throne” (**Psalms 89:15**) and “The Lord remains seated forever; He has set up his throne for justice” (**Psalms 9:8**).

Justice sometimes seemed far away to the Israelites. Like ours, their world was marred by injustice. What had begun as a perfect creation, pronounced “very good” by its Creator, had become violent: “Now the earth was spoiled . . . filled with violence” (**Genesis 6:11**). This state of affairs continued through

the entire history covered by the Old Testament and was noted by a number of Bible writers: "He looked for justice, but found spilt blood" (Isaiah 5:7) and "Justice has been turned back; righteousness stands at a distance; truth has stumbled in the street; uprightness is not able to come in" (Isaiah 59:14).

Had justice abandoned this world? It led people to question God's existence: "Where is the God of justice?" some were asking, according to Malachi 2:17. "The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God!' They are corrupt, they do terrible things, no-one is left who does good" (Psalms 14:1, 2).

Can justice be known?

Since justice was a part of the nature of the God of Israel, it was up to Him to make it available to His chosen people. The original state of pure justice, lost to this world at the fall, God planned to restore through His chosen people. It could be known and even practiced by those who committed themselves to Him.

When the newly crowned King Solomon asked God to help him know justice so he could rule the people, his prayer was soon answered. He justly resolved a dispute between two mothers claiming the same baby, convincing all Israel that "he had God's wisdom to do justice" (1 Kings 4:28). He argued that "a wise heart knows justice" (Ecclesiastes 8:5). Spiritual leaders in Israel were expected to know justice: "Hear now, heads of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel! Shouldn't you have learned justice?" (Micah 3:1). But such knowledge of justice is not limited to kings and leaders. All persons are promised knowledge of justice: "You will then understand righteousness and justice and equity and every well travelled track" (Proverbs 2:9).

While God took the initiative in restoring the knowledge of justice, some human initiative was called for. Israelites were encouraged to search for it: "Learn to do good; search for justice" (Isaiah 1:17) and "Men of evil do not understand justice, but those who search for the Lord understand it, every one of them" (Proverbs 28:5).

Justice in an unjust world

Many passages make clear the Bible's message that justice was not only knowable but also doable. The expression "do justice" occurs 25 times in the Hebrew Bible and God's calls for justice were enablings: "He has explained to

you . . . what is good and what the Lord requires from you—only that you do justice, and love mercy, and walk carefully with your God” (**Micah 6:8**). Doing justice was so fundamental that God would rather have His people do justice than offer sacrifices, if they were forced to choose: “The Lord would prefer that people do righteousness and justice rather than to sacrifice” (**Proverbs 21:3**).

A big part of “doing justice” in the Old Testament was helping needy persons. Those most needing justice in ancient Israel were widows, orphans, the poor and immigrants.⁴ Old Testament justice called for care to be given to others as well, but these were the most vulnerable in Israelite society, who had no welfare system to support them: “[God] does justice for orphan and widow, and He loves the immigrant, giving him food and clothing” (**Deuteronomy 10:18**). God’s people are directed to follow God’s example. If Israel failed to do this sort of justice, they would lose the blessing God intended for them, and the people would find themselves on the receiving end of the curses that God promised, rather than His blessings: “Under a curse is the person who turns away justice intended for the immigrant, the orphan and the widow” (**Deuteronomy 27:19**).

The Hebrew Bible’s law of jubilee (see **Leviticus 25**) was an important device for keeping a just economic distribution across the generations. It would have prevented the gross accumulation of land and goods by some, and the permanent loss of the land and goods by others. The jubilee declared that every 50th year all land that had been sold would be returned to the descendants of the family to which it had first been assigned when the Israelites occupied the land of Canaan. Any Israelite who was forced to work for another Israelite as a servant because he was unable to repay a loan would be released from servitude and returned to his family’s land at the next jubilee. He could take with him any children born to him during his time of service. The jubilee regulations would prevent the poverty resulting from people being forced off their land, and the acquiring of that land by a few people.

The Bible does not record whether the jubilee was observed. If so, it was not observed at all times and in all places. The prophet Isaiah spoke out against the injustice of those who “add house to house and join field to field, until there is no longer any place for anyone but themselves to live” (**Isaiah 5:8**).

Even if the jubilee had been fully observed, it was limited to ethnic Israelites and certified immigrants. It did not apply to non-Israelite slaves, whom the Israelites could buy from neighbouring countries. Those could be kept in slavery along with any children, and their children's children for generations. The Hebrew Bible's laws for social justice thus favoured the Israelites and immigrants. Foreigners were not covered.

Justice for the nations

But God had a plan to extend justice to non-Israelites. The plan included a servant-messiah who would bring justice to all nations. Several prophets foretold the coming of this servant-messiah: "Look! Here is my servant . . . I will put my spirit upon him; he will bring about justice to the nations . . . he will be reliable in bringing about justice" (**Isaiah 42:1, 3**). This and similar prophecies take us beyond the period of history covered by the Old Testament and into the New Testament story of Jesus and His followers, who applied Isaiah's prophecy of a justice-bringing servant-messiah to Jesus (see **Matthew 12:18**).

The best-known public declaration made by Jesus Himself about the place of justice in His mission is in His "Sermon on the Mount." Its fourth "beatitude" speaks of justice: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice" (Greek *dikaiosunē*, **Matthew 5:6**). Anyone familiar with this saying of Jesus will be surprised that the "righteousness" of most translations is replaced here by "justice." But the standard reference work explaining New Testament Greek words lists three fields of meaning for *dikaiosunē*: (1) "the quality, state or practice of judicial responsibility with focus on fairness, **justice, equitableness, fairness**"; (2) quality or state of juridical correctness with focus on redemptive action, **righteousness**; (3) the quality or characteristic of upright behaviour, **uprightness, righteousness**."⁵ Jesus' fourth beatitude makes clear that justice is among the goals of His mission.

Many of the remaining 90 New Testament occurrences of *dikaiosunē* also communicate the idea of justice. In His parable of the sheep and the goats, Jesus again focused on justice. The human needs that the "sheep" met and the "goats" ignored included feeding the hungry, sheltering strangers, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned—especially those of low social status, "the least of these my brothers" (see **Matthew 25:31–46**).

So important were these acts of social justice to Jesus that He repeated the list four times in this parable. Jesus' actions marched alongside His words. He practised the justice He preached by His healing, feeding and associating with the least of His brothers. However, Jesus' ultimate lesson about justice was the cross, where He and His heavenly Father scored a resounding and eternal victory for justice over the combined forces of cosmic injustice.

Did Jesus convince His followers that social justice was an important part of His mission? In answer, note the words and the works of His two best-known followers, the apostles Peter and Paul. Peter was invited to explain Jesus and His mission to the Roman military commander Cornelius. His explanation included justice: "In every nation the person who fears [God] and who works for justice (*dikaiosunē*) is acceptable to him" (**Acts 10:35**). Peter then described Jesus as: "One who went around doing good" (**verse 38**).

The apostle Paul placed justice in the core of Christianity when he explained the Christian faith to Felix, Roman procurator of Palestine. Paul reasoned with Felix about "justice (*dikaiosunē*) and self-control and the coming judgment" (**Acts 24:24, 25**). Elsewhere Paul urged the followers of Jesus to give careful thought to "whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just . . . Whatever you have been taught and taken over and heard and seen in me, do!" (**Philippians 4:8, 9**). Paul acknowledged that justice and injustice continue side by side in this world and even among Christians. Some Christians owned slaves and Paul urged them: "Treat your slaves justly and fairly, knowing that you also have an 'Owner' in heaven" (**Colossians 4:1**).

Justice returns to the cosmos

However, Peter and Paul understood that justice would not fully return to this world in its fallen state. That could happen only after God brings this world to His own court of justice for judgment. Paul stated this in his speech at the Aeropagus, the meeting place of a prestigious court in the city of Athens: "[God] has set a day on which he will judge the world by justice" (**Acts 17:31**). No-one can avoid their day in that divine court: "It is necessary that we all appear at Christ's judgment bench so we can receive the consequences of what we have persisted in doing, whether good or evil" (**2 Corinthians 5:10**) and "The one doing wrong will be paid back for the wrong he does, and there is no favouritism" (**Colossians 3:25**).

At that time, God will reveal all the injustices ever done. There can be no cover-ups: “God judges the secrets of humans through Christ Jesus” (Romans 2:16). Both the victims of injustice and its perpetrators will face the full and complete account of what really happened, the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Then they will be dealt with according to justice as only God knows and exercises it.

Faithful Bible, faithful justice

Our opening question—“What place does justice have in the Bible?”—has been answered by arguing that justice is central in the Bible’s message. From beginning to end, from Genesis to Revelation, the Bible sustains the story of justice. It begins with an account of justice imparted, then lost. As part of the character of God, justice was woven into creation and embedded in the directions He gave about the consequence of doing what was clearly forbidden. The blood of Abel, the first murder victim, took up the cry for God to restore justice. It remains a core theme through the Bible. Justice was learnable and doable by God’s people, Israel. Justice was a core teaching of Jesus for His followers and for the nations. At the cross, justice defeated injustice, making possible the good news that justice will finally be restored to the cosmos. Justice is such a core theme of the Bible that it is not possible to “take in” its full message without recognising the place of justice.

In answer to the second question—“Is there really enough justice in the Bible?”—note that the first to criticise the “justice” of God’s justice was the serpent in the Garden of Eden, with devastating results. From that day until the present, the quantity and quality of biblical justice is questioned and doubted. A few seemingly unjust commands and acts are appealed to, often out of context, to question God’s justice. The answer to such criticism is summed up by one word: “context.” Every Bible passage has a context. Every command, every action, every narrative needs to be read in the all-important, three-part context of the character of God, the Cross and the Second Coming.

And the Bible’s closing message is that it’s just a short time, by God’s timetable, before the return of justice to the cosmos: “We wait for a new heaven and a new earth, in which justice (*dikaioṣunē*) lives” (2 Peter 3:13).

—Steven Thompson is semi-retired supervisor of higher degrees by research at Avondale College of Higher Education in Cooranbong, Australia, where he formerly served as head of theology. His interest in

theology and biblical studies has taken him to universities in the United States and Scotland. In addition to college teaching and administration in England and Australia, he, helped by his wife Kristin, pastored churches in Scotland and England, and recently served a year as interim senior pastor of Avondale College Church, an exhilarating privilege from which both are still recovering.

1. Charles Darwin believed that the human sense of “how each member ought to act for the public good” came about after the evolution of human social instincts and the ability to speak. See his *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*, Vol 1, John Murray, 1871, page 72.
2. Plato, *Republic* 338C.
3. All Bible passages cited in this chapter are the author’s translations. Behind the occurrence of the word “justice” in each Old Testament passage cited in this chapter stands the Hebrew word *mišpat* (pronounced *mishpat*, stress on first syllable). The definitions that fit the passages cited in this chapter include “the principle of conduct that conforms to [righteousness]” and “the sense of right as a principle.”—B Johnson, article *mišpat* in Botterweck, Ringgren & Fabry (editors), *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Vol 9, Eerdmans, 1998, page 93.
4. Hebrew *gēr* is usually translated “sojourner, foreigner, stranger” but the word “immigrant” seems closer to the sort of person referred to in its 92 Hebrew Bible occurrences. “*Gēr* is a man who (alone or with his family) leaves village and tribe because of war . . . famine . . . epidemic, blood guilt, etc, and seeks shelter and residence at another place, where his right of landed property, marriage and taking part in jurisdiction, cult and war has been curtailed.”—Koehler-Baumgartner-Stamm-Richardson (editors), *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, E J Brill, 2001, page 201.
5. F W Danker (editor), *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* (3rd edition), University of Chicago Press, 2000, pages 247–8.

“JUST WORDS”¹

Justice and the Body of Christ

Kendra Haloviak Valentine

Most readers probably remember saying or at least thinking the following words as an elementary student on the playground to our tormentors: “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never harm me.” Yet the tears forming in our eyes exposed the phrase’s fallacy.

Or what about these phrases? “It’s all just talk . . . It will blow over . . . There’s no truth in it anyway . . . It’s just words . . .”

Just words, really? Aren’t words packed with layers of meaning? Don’t they take on a life of their own?

These are the exact words on the diploma bestowed on a Master of Divinity student who graduates from the university where I teach:

“The Trustees of La Sierra University on the recommendation of the faculty . . . confer on [name of recipient] the degree Master of Divinity with all accompanying rights, privileges, and responsibilities. Given at Riverside, in the State of California, this _____ day of June, two thousand _____.”

Are they just words? Or are they really invaluable words that took years of sacrifice and stress to achieve?

Just words? **Are** there such things?

“I love you.”

“I do . . . ‘til death do us part.”

“It’s a girl!”

“I now baptise you in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit . . .”

“Honour thy father and thy mother . . .”

“Amazing grace, how sweet the sound . . .”

Just words?

Or is the reality represented by a word actually much more than “just”? In these words, we sense the wonder of words, the power of a pen, of a voice, of a song.

Words are what we have. Words make thinking possible. Words transform our imaginations. Because of words, we can imagine something new, even before we can see it. Words enable us to analyse what is, and make it possible to express what might be! Words enable us to form a hypothesis we can then test. Words are a theology that holds convictions together. Words make it possible to form theories about our world. Words express the mission for our faith communities. Words are always more than “just words.”

The just words of Amos

The prophet Amos (mid-8th century, BC) knew the power of words. In particular, he knew the power of just words, that is, speaking words of justice. Amos looked out at his world and saw people being treated violently. He saw his own colleagues and neighbours ignoring those with less, those from *different* neighbourhoods. It wasn't that the other people couldn't afford to eat out at restaurants, they couldn't eat at all. The powerful and privileged placed the same value on a poor person as they did a pair of sandals. Think of where you store your shoes. How many pairs of sandals do you have? Imagine each pair as a possible slave you could secure in a trade. The value of a person in Amos' day was no more than the cost of a pair of sandals.

But Amos was convinced that God saw what was going on. God heard the lies and the cries. And Amos preached just words: “Let justice roll down like the waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream” (**Amos 5:24**). Such just words comfort those who know that all is not right. And just words wake up those who have accepted the lie that this is how things are, that we can't change things.

“No!” proclaimed Amos. Violence and devaluing people are not “how things are.” That is *not* God's way. Things *can* change!

Amos proclaimed that those who take God seriously must take *just words* seriously. There were no innocent bystanders when it came to injustice. So God, through Amos, reassured the afflicted that injustice would be stopped. At the same time, the just words attempted to shock, to wake up the

End of product sample

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