



6. Justice

Presbyterians are like we are because Presbyterians are Christians who believe God calls us to be on the side of the ones who are having the hardest time.

Participants in this session will consider God's call for justice through study of

- Deuteronomy 10:17–19
- Matthew 25:31–40
- Amos 5:21–24
- Jeremiah 29:4–7

OPENING PRAYER

*Gracious and loving God,
as we gather to study Scripture and consider its message for us today,
we pray that, by your Spirit, you will be present with us.
We are aware that there are people
in our lives and in our communities who face particular difficulties.
Some experience real racism, sexism, or other forms of structural injustice.
Some are overlooked, dismissed, exploited, or injured.
As we engage in this study and continue with our life together,
continue to speak among and through us your urgent call for justice—
for all people and for the earth as a whole.
Amen.*

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Justice is a central theme of the entire Bible and a relevant concern in every Presbyterian congregation. It's impossible to take the Bible seriously without recognizing its consistent calls for justice. It's impossible to take our neighbors seriously without recognizing that some of them (and some of us) are victims of unfair and inequitable treatment. It is also almost certainly the case that some of our neighbors (and we) cause and benefit from unfair and inequitable treatment of others.

Studying the Bible prayerfully together has led Presbyterians to conclude that the people of God are always called to care for the most vulnerable members of the societies in which we live. From the command to love widows, orphans, and strangers in Deuteronomy 10 to Jesus' identification with hungry, thirsty, sick, displaced, and imprisoned persons in Matthew 25 (and many other passages), the Bible teaches that faithful response to God's love in our lives always involves noticing, actively loving, and supporting others who face personal or communal difficulties.

ENGAGING THE BIBLE

1

Consider **Deuteronomy 10:17–19**.

DEUTERONOMY 10:17

For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe,

The tenth chapter of Deuteronomy is part of a long series of speeches from Moses to the Israelites delineating exactly what it means for them to be God's chosen, beloved, covenant community. The book of Deuteronomy is about the life of that covenant community (Israel) after they have escaped from slavery in Egypt. Deuteronomy is a sort of constitution for Israel as they seek to live faithfully together with God and with each other.

Here in verse 17, Moses is describing Yahweh (God) to the Israelites.

God's self-identification as "God of gods and Lord of lords" is important. This verse affirms that Yahweh (as God self-identifies in **Exodus 3:14**)—the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; of Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel—is not just one of the many competing gods in the ancient world. Yahweh is the *only* God.

God's self-identification as "*the* great God, mighty and awesome" indicates that Yahweh is not engaged in any sort of battles or contests with other "gods." Yahweh is completely in charge. Yahweh has no rivals.

And this great, mighty, unrivaled God “is not partial and takes no bribe.”

The one God who has called us together and made us a people treats us all fairly and equitably, regardless of who we are. This is meant to distinguish Yahweh from other “gods” who were worshiped in the area at that time. The mythologies and narratives around those gods often involved bribery, treachery, and trickery.

DEUTERONOMY 10:18

who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing.

Notice that Moses doesn't say that God demands justice.

The implication here is that God *causes* “the orphan and the widow and . . . the strangers” to receive what they need. Most biblical discussions of justice have to do with calling the members of the Covenant community to treat others (all others) with generosity, compassion, fairness, hospitality, and love.

Let's take a quick peek at **Micah 6:8**:

**[God] has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?**

According to Micah, justice is something that we are required to *do*.

That's directly related to the statement here in verse 18 that Yahweh *executes* justice.

Verse 18 specifically states that God who is great, mighty, awesome, and impartial executes justice for the “orphan, widow, and stranger.”

In the patriarchal society in which these words were originally written and recorded, the status, prospects, and circumstances of any individual depended largely on the adult male to whom they were most closely related. In that context orphans, widows, and strangers were especially vulnerable because they had no adult male to look out for them.

The statement here in verse 18 that God “executes justice for the orphan and the widow” and “loves the stranger” means that the God of Israel who is “not partial and takes no bribe” looks out for those in the community who have no one else (no adult male) looking out for them.

DEUTERONOMY 10:19

You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

Here, Moses is reminding the Israelites that they were once in a place where no one was looking out for them (see **Exodus chapters 1–12**). He reminds them that they had been noticed and cared for when they were vulnerable and overlooked. And he calls them to notice and care for the vulnerable and overlooked ones in their midst.

Although we do not live in societies that are as completely patriarchal as the one in which Deuteronomy was written, Presbyterians believe we are called to notice and care for all of our neighbors who are dismissed, devalued, overlooked, or endangered.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- *Who are people in your community who might have no one looking out for them?*
- *What is the significance of the recognition that justice is something that we're called to do?*

2

Consider **Matthew 25:31–40**.

MATTHEW 25:31–32

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats,

In this metaphor, Jesus (“the Son of Man”) divides “all the nations” into two groups: sheep and goats. This would have been a familiar and accessible image for those who originally heard or read this story. Sheep and goats are separate, though closely-related, species. Their dietary needs are not the same. They don’t always get along well together in common herds. The long-term health of both herds is increased when sheep and goats are kept separately.

Separating sheep from goats is a little like separating whites from colors when doing laundry. It’s a good and easy way to avoid potential problems.

MATTHEW 25:33

and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.

For a variety of reasons, many ancient cultures regarded the right side as superior to the left. To this day, many cultures maintain a preference for the right.

There are some reasons for that. You can look them up if you want to, but for now it's sufficient to say that the placement of the sheep at the right hand of the Son of Man implies preference for them. (See **Hebrews 1:3, 12:2; 1 Peter 3:22; Acts 7:55–56.**)

MATTHEW 25:34

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world,

This is a clear and full-throated endorsement of the behavior of the sheep.

MATTHEW 25:35–36

for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.'

One of the amazing and exciting and inspiring features of the Bible is that the behaviors that Jesus commends in this story—

- Feeding the hungry;
- Giving drink to the thirsty;
- Welcoming strangers;
- Clothing the naked;
- Caring for the sick; and
- Visiting the imprisoned—

are as fully relevant and necessary in the world where we woke up today as they were when this story was originally written nearly 2000 years ago.

MATTHEW 25:37–39

Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’

The sheep probably don’t mind the shout-out from the Son of Man, but they’re perplexed when he makes this a story about him.

“What do you mean, ‘you fed *me*’ and ‘welcomed *me*’? We’re pretty sure we would have recognized you if you had been there. We didn’t see you at all.”

MATTHEW 25:40

And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.”

This is the punch line of the story.

Jesus—who is our clearest picture of who God is—identifies with those who are hungry, thirsty, vulnerable to the elements, displaced, sick, and imprisoned. He calls those at-risk persons “brothers and sisters of mine” and clearly praises the “sheep” because they care for them.

Presbyterians are Christians who believe God calls us to be on the side of the ones who are having the hardest time.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- *In what ways do you—or your congregation, or the larger Presbyterian Church—care for people who are hungry, thirsty, vulnerable to the elements, displaced, sick, or imprisoned?*
- *What are other ways we can identify and care for people in our communities who are having a hard time?*
- *How can we / do we care for them?*

3

Study of other biblical passages such as **Amos 5:21–24** and **Jeremiah 29:4–7** has led Presbyterians to conclude that God’s call to be on the side of the ones who are having the hardest time is not only a call to us as individuals—though that is certainly part of God’s call. We also believe we are called to influence the societies and communities we are part of to notice and care for those among us who are having the hardest time.

Consider **Amos 5:21–24**.

AMOS 5:21

**I hate, I despise your festivals,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.**

That’s a pretty harsh message from God to the community of Israel.

As is probably the case in your congregation and is certainly the case in the Presbyterian Church, the life of the Israelite community to whom God was speaking through Amos included several festivals and celebrations. Many of those festivals and assemblies are called for in the Hebrew Scriptures.

AMOS 5:22

**Even though you offer me your burnt offerings
and grain offerings,
I will not accept them.
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals
I will not look upon.**

Again, God is referring to things that the Israelites are instructed to do in other places in their Scriptures—particularly in Leviticus, Deuteronomy, and Numbers.

AMOS 5:23–24

**Take away from me the noise of your songs;
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.
But let justice roll down like water
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.**

It isn’t that God minds festivals, assemblies, offerings, or songs. Those are appropriate responses to God’s grace.

The point of Amos 5:21–24 is that those actions are only appropriate when they are accompanied by consistent efforts by the entire community to care for the ones who are having the hardest time.

Presbyterians believe God calls us to be on the side of the ones who are having the hardest time.

QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

- *How can we influence our communities to care for those of our neighbors who are having the hardest time?*

4

Consider **Jeremiah 29:4–7**:

JEREMIAH 29:4

Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon:

This is God speaking through Jeremiah to Israelites who have been removed from a place in which theirs was the dominant religion—where nearly everybody thought about God the same way they did.

This is God talking to believers about how to be faithful in a very diverse place.

Since we are encountering this story in a society that grows more diverse every day, Presbyterians find much relevant insight in the words that follow.

JEREMIAH 29:5

Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce.

That is, “Settle down and settle in. Don’t spend your time wishing things were how they used to be. Figure out how to be faithful, fully present, and hopeful where you are.”

JEREMIAH 29:6

Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease.

Build families.

Keep living the way I taught you to live.

Read your Bibles.

Stick together.

Remember who—and *Whose*—you are.

Keep the faith.

JEREMIAH 29:7

But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

Don't resent the fact that there are other folks in the city where you find yourself who are different than you. They all matter too.

Do whatever you can to be good neighbors.

Live in such a way that everybody thinks it's good news that y'all are there.

CONCLUSION

Presbyterians believe that our duty to care for the ones having the hardest time is not limited to our particular faith community.

We believe God calls us to be full and loving participants in all of the diverse communities that we're part of. We believe we are called to seek the welfare of the cities—and other communities—where we find ourselves. And we believe we are called to care for the ones in those communities who are having the hardest time.

We believe we are called to exercise our influence in our communities on behalf of our neighbors who are hungry, thirsty, vulnerable to the elements, displaced, sick, and imprisoned. We believe we are called actively to dismantle unjust social structures and to cooperate with all our neighbors to build just and kind communities.

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QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- *As an individual, or as a congregation, how can you/do you “seek the welfare of the city” where you are?*
- *What have we learned in these passages about God?*
- *Ourselves?*
- *Each other?*

BEST PRACTICES FOR PRESBYTERIAN BIBLE STUDY

- *What best practice for Presbyterian Bible Study can you articulate from the approach this study has taken to the Presbyterian recognition that God calls us to be on the side of the ones who are having the hardest time?*

This might be an appropriate time to remember this sentence from the first lesson in this “Why Presbyterians Are Like That” series:

Throughout our history, Presbyterians have especially benefited from insights gained and shared by Christians who were not part of the dominant culture. When we’re at our best, Presbyterians attend to the perspectives of fellow Christians who have been overlooked, devalued, and dismissed—often by others who use the Bible to justify and rationalize unjust behavior.
