

Do Justice (Week 4) - Unholy Religion and Holy Anger (The Old Testament Prophets)

Yesterday's Sermon Summary

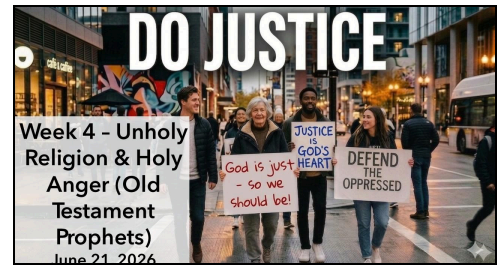
1. In our biblical tour about justice, we stopped in with the Old Testament prophets yesterday. Of all the major sections of scripture, this is probably the one most commonly associated with the theme and message of "justice," The O.T. prophets presume or build upon the principles we've already covered, such as those in the Mosaic Law.

2. If the Mosaic Law is the wise teacher about justice, then the prophets are the graffiti artists spray-painting those ideas on the city walls for everyone to see. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, in his work on the prophets, said that they are not merely pious moralists nor social critics; instead, they are those who felt the heartbeat of God, the divine pathos, about justice. As Jeremiah the prophet put it, the message of justice was like a fire in his bones that he couldn't contain (Jeremiah 20.9).

3. Yesterday we took a deep dive into two distinctive ways we hear justice presented in the O.T. prophets. First, for the prophets there are two kinds of religion - religion that is centered on the need for and work of justice, and religion that is an empty facade. You can hear this in texts such as [Isaiah 1.12-17](#), [Isaiah 58.6-10](#), [Amos 5.10-24](#), [Micah 6.6-8](#), and [Jeremiah 7.21-23](#).

4. There is a sad irony in these passages: God gave Israel the gift of Sabbath, annual religious festivals, worship through various grain and animal sacrifices, and prayers such as the Psalms...and yet all of them became hollow and emptied-out for the people and distasteful to God because justice was neglected or outright counteracted. Jonathan Sacks, the former chief rabbi of the UK, concludes, "Ritual without righteousness is an abomination to God...You cannot pray to God in the sanctuary while allowing the poor to be exploited in the marketplace and then expect God to listen."

5. We're left to ask - how on earth did this happen within Israel, the same people who were given the clear precepts of the Mosaic Law and whose own origin involved a great act of God against a grave injustice (The Exodus)? Walter Brueggemann, the eminent Old Testament scholar, offers this insight: Israel is no different than any other group or human beings...our religions tend to be blind in the same way and to the same things as the culture(s) surrounding them, and moreover all human religion, given enough time, will bend toward the comfortable and self-serving. It takes bold, courageous prophetic voices, like those in the O.T., to wake God's people to these tendencies and then for them to change course.



6. However, we probably also need to ask an even more uncomfortable question about religion and justice - how indivisible to your own Christian upbringing was justice? If you were steeped and formed within white American Christianity, there's a decent chance it wasn't. And here's why, as explained by American church historian Jemar Tisby: "Dating back the early history of our nation, white American Christians have said that the church should not involve itself in social or so-called political issues. This allowed them to focus on evangelism and personal spirituality while ignoring the oppression happening right outside their church doors. Thus, the white American church could remain comfortable, pious, and complicit. It could have a high degree of subjective religious devotion while remaining completely blind to objective social injustice." In short, many of us grew up in a version of Christianity that, for various reasons, ignored or sidelined the centrality of justice in scripture.

7. Moving on to the second distinctive feature of the O.T. prophets in regard to justice, what we hear and see in them is a raw, unfiltered anger over not just personal sin, but also structural and systemic sin (economic, legal, political). Sufficed to say that many of us would be uncomfortable using the kind of stark language and imagery that the prophets in order to communicate God's displeasure at injustice: e.g., when powerful and rich mistreat the less fortunate it's as if a) they are grinding their heads into the dirt with their feet (Amos 2.6-7) or b) they are flaying their flesh, cooking it, and eating it (Micah 3.1-8).

8. And here we paused to talk about anger, because we in 2026 America live in what's been dubbed "an age of outrage," a kind of perpetual anger factory day after day after day. And chronic anger is personally and socially destructive - e.g, it hinders our judgment and ability to think critically, and it makes us more fearful of those with whom we disagree. Anger is a good spark but a poor fuel; it can motivate us to start but it cannot sustain us.

9. In two books that we'll recommend at the end of this series (by Wesley Grandberg-Michelson and Richard Rohr), we learn that we need to develop and maintain "holding spaces" in our own personal and corporate spiritual practices. We bring our prophetic anger into these spaces and lift it to God: we lament, we weep, our heart breaks, we feel our smallness in the face of the world's injustice, etc. When we do that, we are freed to then ask God to what specifically God is calling us, and what small difference God wants us to make, even if that difference is not made in our lifetime. This process is called "the alchemy of tears." For anyone willing to see the oppression, neglect, and deep wounds of the world, their spiritual life must have these "holding spaces" in which their own anger is diffused, offloaded, and transformed. Otherwise, they'll poison themselves in time.

10. So what did we learn about "doing justice" from the prophets?: a) Make justice a central part of what it means for you to be a Christian, and be willing to encounter anew this theme everywhere in scripture; b) Pay close attention to how you and your Christianity may be blind to justice issues in the same way our own culture is; c) Don't let your anger over injustice poison you; and d) Develop "holding spaces" in your personal spiritual practice in which your anger can be salvaged and transformed.

A Prayer for the Week

Almighty God, forgive us when our worship is bright and bold but our hearts are closed to justice, and when we sing loudly but remain silent in the face of inequity, prejudice, and neglect.

Turn us away from superficial religion, Lord, and make your justice the very center of who we are. We admit that too often we mirror the indifference and bias of the culture around us. Open our eyes to see the depth of our world's wounds and its collective brokenness.

Awaken us, Holy One, and deliver us from the illusions that keep us silent. Like the ancient prophets whose sentiment imitated Your own, may we feel holy urgency for the vulnerable, the forgotten, and the oppressed.

Save us from the destructive anger of our age, which burns like a fire but leaves only ash. Transform our passion into sacred lament in Your presence and sustained action for the sake of others.

Send us forth now to loosen the bonds of injustice, to champion the cause of the needy, to lift the heavy yokes from our neighbors, and to name both what is evil and what is Your better alternative. May our own lives be part of how You answer this prayer that we offer together, amen.

More in the Prophets this Week

- Probably the best thing you can do this week is read a section from the prophets each day, just to get more familiar with their perspective and passion:

- Monday reading: [Isaiah 58.1-12 NRSVUE](#)
- Tuesday reading: [Isaiah 5.8-25 NRSVUE](#)
- Wednesday reading: [Amos 5.1-24 NRSVUE](#)
- Thursday reading: [Jeremiah 5.1-13 NRSVUE](#)
- Friday reading: [Ezekiel 16.1-52 NRSVUE](#)
- Saturday reading: [Amos 6.1-8 NRSVUE](#)

- Try using some of your personal spiritual time this week as a "holding space" for your anger - in that time, lament, be willing to feel your smallness or helplessness in the face of so much injustice, and ask God what specific difference God wants you to make.

- If you're interested in learning more about prophets, and in some small way how each of us as Christians are called to be one, try these:

- A week's worth of brief excerpts from Richard Rohr's book "The Tears of Things - Prophetic Wisdom for an Age of Outrage": [The Path of the Prophet Archives](#)
- An interview with Walter Brueggemann on being prophetic and not burning out: [Being Prophetic, Avoiding Burnout, & Journeying with the Prophets – Questions That Matter](#)

- And these resources talk through the theme of justice specifically within the O.T. prophets:

- [The Social Justice Prophets](#)
- [The Prophets of the Hebrew Bible and the Primacy of Social Justice](#)
- ['Let justice prevail': Biblical prophets' lessons for modern life](#)