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Session 3



GLOBAL EDITION

EDITED BY: JASON FILETA



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Micah Challenge USA
1033 SW Yamhill St. Suite #102
Portland, OR 97205

1.888.789.4660
www.tearfund.org/livejustly
www.micahchallengeusa.org
www.livejust.ly

Cover photograph by Jennifer Wilmore
Editor: Jason Fileta
Assistant Editor: Mari Williams
Assistant Editor: Naomi Foxwood

Contributors: Mari Williams, Nicholas Wolterstorff, Jason Fileta, René Padilla, Ronald J. Sider, Alita Ram, Ashley Walker, José Marcos da Silva, Daniel Solano Maldonado, Gaston Slanwa, Sunia Gibbs, Kimberly Hunt, Naomi Foxwood, Eugene Cho

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Session Three

Justice: Combining Charity and Advocacy

“We are not to simply bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice, we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself.”

- Dietrich Bonhoeffer

“Charity is no substitute for justice withheld.”

- St. Augustine

Definitions

Relief: Assistance, generally one-time or short-term, in the form of food, clothing or money offered to people in crisis.

Charity: A voluntary act or gift contributed to those in need, given out of compassion or love.

Biblical Justice: The condition and action required for the state of wholeness and flourishing due all of God's creation.

Structural Injustice: Sin that infects the systems that govern society such as economic and public policy.

Ambulance Drivers or Tunnel Builders by Ron Sider

A group of devout Christians once lived in a small village at the foot of a mountain. A winding, slippery road with hairpin curves and steep precipices without guard rails wound its way up one side of the mountain and down the other. There were frequent fatal accidents. Deeply saddened by the injured people who were pulled from the wrecked cars, the Christians in the village's three churches decided to act. They pooled their resources and purchased an ambulance. Over the years, they saved many lives although some victims remained crippled for life.

Then one day a visitor came to town. Puzzled, he asked why they did not close the road over the mountain and build a tunnel instead. Startled at first, the ambulance volunteers quickly pointed out that this approach, although technically quite possible, was not realistic or advisable. After all, the narrow mountain road had been there for a long time. Besides, the mayor of the town would bitterly oppose the idea. He owned a large restaurant and service station halfway up the mountain.

The visitor was shocked that the mayor's economic interests mattered more to these Christians than the many human casualties. Somewhat hesitantly, he suggested that perhaps the churches ought to speak to the mayor. Perhaps they should even elect a different mayor if he

proved stubborn and unconcerned. Now the Christians were shocked. With rising indignation and righteous conviction they informed the young radical that the church dare not become involved in politics. The church is called to preach the gospel and give a cup of cold water, they said. Its mission is not to dabble in worldly things like social and political structures.

Perplexed and bitter, the visitor left. As he wandered out of the village, one question churned round and round in his muddled mind. Is it really more spiritual, he wondered, to operate the ambulances which pick up the bloody victims of destructive social structures than to try to change the social structures themselves?

The Circle of Justice

by Jason Fileta

A few years ago I spoke at a conference to inspire support for a piece of legislation we were working on at Micah Challenge USA, called the Jubilee Act. Essentially, there were sixty-seven nations who were servicing debts to the US government at the expense of being able to provide healthcare, education, and water to their people. The debts they were repaying, some of them decades old, were often lent irresponsibly to dictators at very high interest rates, and we were punishing the citizens of these nations by requiring the repayment of this debt. It was a justice issue.

It was a justice issue that could only be resolved with effective and prophetic advocacy. We could try to set up hospitals, schools and feeding programs in those sixty-seven nations, but the underlying cause of their inability to do it themselves would still be there: their debt. My role was to inspire the attendees of this conference to not just look upon the hungry with compassion and give them bread, but to cause them to ask why they were hungry - to take decisive action to fix an unjust policy.

After the conference was over myself and the other speakers went out for dinner. At dinner, I mentioned some of the things I had been struggling with at this conference and many other justice and advocacy conferences I had spoken at previously. I was struggling with the disconnectedness of our principles of justice and how we actually ran the conference. The voices of people living in poverty were often absent, food and other resources were often wasted and the opportunities for generosity and charitable acts were few or none. However, the opportunities for advocacy were many, but our advocacy alone seemed incomplete.

One of the other speakers essentially told me I needed to relax and remember why I do what I do. She explained that she lived in a huge house, in a comfortable, safe neighbourhood and indulged in a nice

glass of wine and fine food because that was what she deserved, or what was needed to keep her going in the fight for justice. She implied that she (or me for that matter) didn't need to be radically generous, or consume less for the sake of giving more directly to those living in poverty because she was dealing with the structural causes of injustice. We didn't need to be bothered with small acts of charity.

Something didn't feel right.

Here is the reality. Advocacy is not justice. Charity is not justice. The picture of justice we see in scripture is a prerequisite for shalom - a time when all brokenness is made right. When relationships between people are healed, relationships between people and God are healed, relationships between people and systems are healed, relationships between people and creation are healed, and one's own relationship with self is healed. Advocacy and charity are certainly essential components of justice, and therefore shalom, but neither is a synonym for justice.

For so long we've seen people hungry - no matter how much we feed them. This has led a movement of us to work for an end to hunger not by delivering more food but by delivering more justice through advocating to governments and corporations for more just policies and practices. Let me tell you something - it is fun to be an advocate. Sometimes, it is exhilarating. To know that your work helped create a level playing field is incredible. To stand in the halls of power and speak prophetically is euphoric (and scary!). I imagine it is similar (although on a much smaller scale) to the exhilaration Moses felt leading the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt.

In fact, a lot of advocates (myself included) use the story of Moses and the exodus to highlight the essential role of advocacy. God called Moses to go to Pharaoh, the political leader of the day, and release the Israelites from slavery. He didn't call Moses to go to the Israelites and comfort, feed and clothe them through setting up a charity, all the while not addressing the cause of their suffering. But does this mean God was not concerned about their immediate needs being met? Returning to the issue of hunger in our day, does this mean God is not

concerned about the hungry being fed while we dismantle unjust policies that cause hunger?

Absolutely not!

The whole of scripture points to a God who wants to see the “captives released, the hungry fed and the naked clothed”. Advocacy alone will not accomplish this. Neither will charity alone.

I am certain that though Moses’ calling as an advocate was unique, there were others, perhaps thousands, called to radical acts of charity and generosity to clothe, comfort and feed the Israelites while still in slavery. It is only consistent with our God that he called up compassionate people to be His presence among the Israelites. Both callings were necessary, both are worthy and both are part of the call to do justice.

Biblical justice is holistic in nature. It is a circle made up of many points. If we are tireless advocates, but at the expense of our personal relationships, then the circle is broken. If we are compassionate to the impoverished through charity and generosity, but fail to challenge unjust structures that cause their oppression then, too, the circle is broken.

To truly see justice done we must become competent and committed to a holistic lifestyle of justice including charity and advocacy. We must not choose one over the other, but rather recognise what our unique calling is while still embracing the other things God calls us to in a lifestyle of justice. Let the circle be unbroken!

Read Exodus 3 Together

Moses and the Burning Bush

- 1 Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God.
- 2 There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up.
- 3 So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight - why the bush does not burn up?"
- 4 When the Lord saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, "Moses! Moses!" And Moses said, "Here I am."
- 5 "Do not come any closer," God said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground."
- 6 Then he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God.
- 7 The Lord said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering.
- 8 So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey - the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites.
- 9 And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them.
- 10 So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt."
- 11 But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"
- 12 And God said, "I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain."

- 13 Moses said to God, "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?"
- 14 God said to Moses, "I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I am has sent me to you.'"
- 15 God also said to Moses, "Say to the Israelites, 'The Lord, the God of your fathers - the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob - has sent me to you.' "This is my name forever, the name you shall call me from generation to generation.
- 16 "Go, assemble the elders of Israel and say to them, 'The Lord, the God of your fathers - the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob - appeared to me and said: I have watched over you and have seen what has been done to you in Egypt.
- 17 And I have promised to bring you up out of your misery in Egypt into the land of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites - a land flowing with milk and honey.'
- 18 The elders of Israel will listen to you. Then you and the elders are to go to the king of Egypt and say to him, 'The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us. Let us take a three-day journey into the wilderness to offer sacrifices to the Lord our God.'
- 19 But I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless a mighty hand compels him.
- 20 So I will stretch out my hand and strike the Egyptians with all the wonders that I will perform among them. After that, he will let you go.
- 21 And I will make the Egyptians favorably disposed toward this people, so that when you leave you will not go empty-handed.
- 22 Every woman is to ask her neighbor and any woman living in her house for articles of silver and gold and for clothing, which you will put on your sons and daughters. And so you will plunder the Egyptians."

Questions for Discussion

1. If Moses was called to help those in slavery today, what do you think the church would think of his strategy?
2. Can you think of an example of well intentioned Christians trying to combat injustice through charity alone? Did it free people?
3. Consider the issue of hunger. In what ways can we respond to hunger, not just through providing food, but through loosening the chains of injustice?
4. What is God saying to you, and what are you going to do about it?

Together

As a group, choose one specific justice issue (eg hunger, human trafficking, HIV and AIDS). Brainstorm what engagement would look like if charity and advocacy united for justice.

Now consider your own engagement with a justice issue you are passionate about. Share which path you tend to gravitate toward: a response of charity, advocacy or a mixture of both? How are you feeling challenged to engage with the issue you are passionate about in a new way?

Solo Work

Consider a justice issue facing your community. Identify the problem, and search for the root cause by continuing to ask, “Why?”

Now consider the existing responses to the problem. Are they treating the symptoms, the root or both?

Continue to work on your creative expression.

Prayer

Lord, give me eyes to see the structures and systems that perpetuate injustice. Help me also to see the immediate needs of the oppressed, and may I never seek justice at the expense of being charitable. Give me a courageous voice to hold my leaders accountable to how their decisions affect the vulnerable.

END

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