THREE

What Did Jesus Say About Justice?

When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. . . .

Luke 14:12–13

"But That's the Old Testament!"

When I was a young pastor at my first church in Hopewell, Virginia, a single mother with four children began attending our services. It became clear very quickly that she had severe financial problems, and several people in the church proposed that we try to help her. By that time I had begun to share my doctoral research with some of the church's deacons. I pointed out that historically church deacons had given aid in exactly these circumstances. So the deacons vis-

ited her and offered to give her church funds for several months to help her pay off outstanding bills. She happily accepted. Three months later it came out that, instead of paying her bills with the money we had been giving her, she had spent it on sweets and junk food, had gone out to restaurants with her family multiple times, and had bought each child a new bike. Not a single bill had been paid, and she needed more money.

One of the deacons was furious. "No way do we give her any more," he said to me. "This is the reason that she's poor—she's irresponsible, driven by her impulses! That was God's money and she wasted it." I countered with some passages from the Bible on doing justice for the fatherless and the needy. "But that's the *Old* Testament," he said, and argued that today it was Christians' job to spread the good news about Jesus. "Christians should not be concerned about poverty and social conditions, but about saving souls."

We have been making the case that the Bible calls us to be deeply involved in defending and caring for the poor, but indeed, we have so far looked at the Hebrew Scriptures, that part of the Bible that Christians call the Old Testament. My deacon was not a trained theologian, but his intuition is a common one, namely that while the Old Testament talks a lot about evil and justice, Jesus talks mainly about love and forgiveness. Anders Nygren, the influential author of *Agape and Eros,* pub-

lished in the 1930s, argued this forcefully at a scholarly level. "God's attitude to men is not characterized by *justitia distributiva,* but by agape [love], not by retributive righteousness, but by freely giving and forgiving love."[50] Nygen's argument was that, for God, love and justice are mutually exclusive, they don't mix at all. In this view Christ has overcome justice and now all our relationships should be based on spontaneous love and generosity, not justice. Justice is all about "rights" and legal obligations, but Christ's salvation is a grace that is undeserved. Christians should not be concerned with getting people their rights. The gospel is about love and service, about forgiveness and caring for people regardless of their rights.

Jesus and the Vulnerable

This reasoning seems plausible at first glance. However, when we study the gospels we find that Jesus has not "moved on" at all from the Old Testament's concern for justice. In fact, Jesus has an intense interest in and love for the same kinds of vulnerable people. Nor can it be argued that this concern is a lower priority for Jesus. When some of John the Baptist's disciples came and asked him if he truly was the Messiah, he said:

> *Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who*

have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.

Matthew 11:4–5

Here is the same care for the vulnerable that characterizes the heart of God. While clearly Jesus was preaching the good news to all, he showed throughout his ministry the particular interest in the poor and the downtrodden that God has always had.

Jesus, in his incarnation, "moved in" with the poor. He lived with, ate with, and associated with the socially ostracized (Matt 9:13). He raised the son of the poor widow (Luke 7:11–16) and showed the greatest respect to the immoral woman who was a social outcast (Luke 7:36ff). Indeed, Jesus spoke with women in public, something that a man with any standing in society would not have done, but Jesus resisted the sexism of his day (John 4:27).[51] Jesus also refused to go along with the racism of his culture, making a hated Samaritan the hero of one of his most famous parables (Luke 10:26ff) and touching off a riot when he claimed that God loved Gentiles like the widow of Zarephath and Naaman the Syrian as much as Jews (Luke 4:25–27). Jesus showed special concern for children, despite his apostles' belief that they were not worth Jesus's time (Luke 18:15).

Lepers also figured greatly in Jesus's ministry. They

were not only sick and dying, but were the outcasts of society. Jesus not only met their need for physical healing, but reached out his hand and touched them, giving them their first human contact in years (Mark 1:41; Luke 5:13). He called his disciples to give to the poor in the strongest and most startling ways, while praising the poor for their own generosity (Mark 12:42–43).

His own mother prophesied that he would "fill the poor" but turn the rich away empty (Luke 1:53). Yet Jesus also showed true justice by opening his arms to several classes of people who were not just poor. He ate with and spoke to tax collectors, the wealthiest people in society, yet the most hated, since they acquired their gains through collaborating with the Roman forces of occupation. The first witnesses to Jesus's birth were shepherds, a despised group considered unreliable, yet God revealed the birth of his son first to them. The first witnesses of Jesus's resurrection were women, another class of people so marginalized that their testimony was not admissible evidence in court. Yet Jesus revealed himself to them first. The examples are too many too enumerate.

Look at two of Jesus's directions to his followers regarding the poor. In Luke 14, he challenged people to routinely open their homes and purses to the poor, the blind, and the maimed.

When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. . . .

Luke 14:12–13

The great eighteenth-century hymn-writer and ex–slave trader John Newton marveled at the far-reaching implications of these words. "One would almost think that Luke 14:12–14 was not considered part of God's word," he wrote, "nor has any part of Jesus's teaching been more neglected by his own people. I do not think it is unlawful to entertain our friends; but if these words do not teach us that it is in some respects our duty to give a *preference* to the poor, I am at a loss to understand them."[52]

What was Jesus saying here? Later in this same chapter, Jesus tells his disciples that they must "hate" their fathers and mothers if they are going to follow him (Luke 14:26). This sounds shocking to us, but it is a Semitic idiomatic expression. Jesus did not mean literally that we should hate our parents, since this would contradict his own teaching (Mark 7:9–13) and the Ten Commandments. Rather, the expression meant that your love and loyalty for Jesus should so

exceed all other loyalties that they look like "hate" by comparison. This way of speaking sheds light on Jesus's statement about banquets.

In Jesus's day, society operated largely on a patronage system. People with means created influence networks by opening doors and giving resources to people who in turn provided business opportunities and political favors, and watched out for their patrons' interests. In this kind of culture, banquets were necessary. They were expensive, but they paid off because that was the way that business was done. Dinners were ways to sustain and reward current patronage relationships and also were opportunities for creating new ones. That is why the only people you invited were your own peers and existing relations, as well as "your rich neighbors."

Jesus's advice would have looked like economic and social suicide. He commanded that his disciples should share their homes and build relationships not with people from their own social class (or higher) who would profit them, but with people who were poor and without influence, who could never pay them back with money or favors. When Jesus said, "don't invite your friends for dinner" he should not be taken literally, any more than when he said we should hate our father and our mother. Indeed, Jesus often ate meals in homes with his friends and peers. Rather—to put this in a more modern context—he is saying that we should

spend *far* more of our money and wealth on the poor than we do on our own entertainment, or on vacations, or on eating out and socializing with important peers.

Jesus bluntly and shockingly contradicted the spirit and practice of the patronage system of his day, telling his disciples to give without expecting repayment (Luke 6:32–36; 14:13–14) and, if possible, in secret (Matthew 6:1–4). His followers' help of the poor was thus motivated by a sense of simple justice (e.g., Luke 18:1–8) and a real concern to alleviate misery (e.g., Luke 10:25–37, *"mercy"*). The patronage system was characterized by neither compassion nor justice. It did not unite a society divided by class and race—it sustained the status quo. Jesus's ethic of love attacked the world system at its root.

In a second passage, Jesus exhorts his disciples to "sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys" (Luke 12:33). He also famously told the rich young ruler to sell *all* his possessions and give them to the poor (Matthew 19:21; Luke 18:22). What do we say to such strong injunctions? It can be argued that the command to the rich young ruler was not a universal. As evidence, we can point to Jesus's encounter with the rich tax collector Zacchaeus, who, when converted, happily told

Jesus that he was giving one half of all his wealth to the poor. Jesus responded positively. He didn't say, "No, that's not enough." What is Jesus's point, then, in these exhortations? It must be *at least* this—that his believers should not see any of their money as their own, and they should be profoundly involved with and generous to the poor.

Jesus and the Prophets

Jesus not only shared the Old Testament's zeal for the cause of the vulnerable, he also adopted the prophets' penetrating use of justice as heart-analysis, the sign of true faith. At first glance, no two things can seem more opposed than grace and justice. Grace is giving benefits that are not deserved, while justice is giving people exactly what they do deserve. In Christ we receive grace, unmerited favor. Nevertheless, in the mind of the Old Testament prophets as well as the teaching of Jesus, an encounter with grace inevitably leads to a life of justice.

Isaiah, Jeremiah, Zechariah, and Micah all leveled the charge that, while the people attended worship, observed all religious regulations, and took pride in their Biblical knowledge, nevertheless they took advantage of the weak and vulnerable. The prophets concluded that, therefore, their religious activity was not

just insufficient, it was deeply offensive to God. In Isaiah chapters 1 and 58 the message is chilling:

> *When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you. . . . Your hands are full of blood. . . . Learn to do right! Seek justice [*mishpat*], encourage the oppressed. Defend the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.*
>
> Isaiah 1:17

> *Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter . . . ?*
>
> Isaiah 58:6–7

The implications of this accusation are clear. Justice is not just one more thing that needs to be added to the people's portfolio of religious behavior. A lack of justice is a sign that the worshippers' hearts are not right with God at all, that their prayers and all their religious observance are just filled with self and pride. In Isaiah 29:21, when the people are charged with "depriving the innocent of justice," God's conclusion is that "these people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me."

Jesus's criticism of the religious leaders in Mark 12 was identical. He said: "Watch out for the teachers of the law. . . . They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. Such men will be punished most severely" (Mark 12:38, 40). Behind their excessive religious observances are lives that are insensitive to the vulnerable classes. In Jesus's view, this revealed that they did not know God or his grace at all.[53]

The echoes of the prophets' preaching became even clearer in Luke 11:38–42, where Jesus turned his gaze on the Pharisees, whom he describes as "full of greed and wickedness" (verse 38). They were very religious but they "neglect *justice* and the love of God" (verse 42).[54] Like Isaiah, Jesus taught that a lack of concern for the poor is not a minor lapse, but reveals that something is seriously wrong with one's spiritual compass, the heart. He prescribes a startling remedy: "You Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed. . . . Give what is inside to the poor, and everything will be clean for you" (Luke 11:41). The metaphor is striking. Biblical scholar Joel Green explains it this way: "The disposition of one's possessions signifies the disposition of one's heart."[55] The purification of the heart through grace and love for the poor are of a piece; they go together in the theology of Jesus.

Perhaps the passage in Jesus's teaching that is most

directly like Isaiah 1 and 58 is the famous parable of "the Sheep and the Goats" in Matthew 25:31–46. There Jesus compared Judgment Day to the common task of shepherds who had to identify and remove the goats from the flock. On that day, he taught, there will be many people who claim to have believed in him who he will reject. His true sheep, he insisted, have a heart for "the least of these my brethren," which Jesus defined as the hungry, the stranger, the "naked," the sick, and the imprisoned (verses 35–36). If we assume that Jesus was using the term "brethren" in his usual way, to refer to believers, then he was teaching that genuine disciples of Christ will create a new community that does not exclude the poor, the members of other races, or the powerless, and does deal with their needs sacrificially and practically.[56]

Jesus gave us a long list of his disciples' activities. They were to give food and drink to the hungry, which meant emergency relief. But the "strangers" were immigrants and refugees, and they were to get much more than food. They were to be "invited in." They were not merely sent to a shelter but were to be welcomed into the disciples' homes and lives and, it is implied, given advocacy, friendship, and the basics for pursuing a new life in society. Those who were "naked" were likely very close to what we might call the homeless—the poorest of the poor. The disciples were to "clothe" them.

The sick were to be "looked after." The Greek word used for this is *episkopos,* which meant to give oversight and supervision. That meant that the ill and diseased were to be given comprehensive care until they were well. Finally, the disciples were to "visit" prisoners, which meant they were to give them comfort and encouragement. It is a remarkably comprehensive list. This is the kind of community that Jesus said his true disciples would establish. Believers should be opening their homes and purses to each other, drawing even the poorest and most foreign into their homes and community, giving financial aid, medical treatment, shelter, advocacy, active love, support, and friendship.

But there is something even more startling about this discourse of Jesus. Jesus did *not* say that all this done for the poor was a means of getting salvation, but rather it was the sign that you already had salvation, that true, saving faith was already present.[57] How does he show that? He tells the sheep, "When you embraced the poor, you embraced me," and to the goats he says, "When you ignored the poor, you ignored me." This meant that one's heart attitude toward the poor reveals one's heart attitude toward Christ. Jesus was saying, "If you had opened up your hearts and lives to them, then I would know you have opened up your hearts and lives to me. If you were closed to them, I know you were closed to me." No heart that loves Christ *can*

be cold to the vulnerable and the needy. Why is that? The answer for that must wait until chapter 5. At this point, we simply recognize the implications. Anyone who has truly been touched by the grace of God will be vigorous in helping the poor.

A Whole Cloth

In both the gospels of Matthew and Luke, Jesus delivers a famous discourse, which is usually called the Sermon on the Mount. For centuries readers have acknowledged the beauty of its high ethical standards. What is not noticed very often is how Jesus weaves into a whole cloth what we would today call private morality and social justice. Along with the well-known prohibitions against sexual lust in the heart, adultery, and divorce there are calls to give to the poor (Matthew 6:1–4) and to refrain from overwork and materialism (Matthew 6:19–24).

In Western society these sets of concerns have often been split off from one another. In fact, each of America's two main political parties has built its platform on one of these sets of ethical prescriptions to the near exclusion of the other. Conservatism stresses the importance of personal morality, especially the importance of traditional sexual mores and hard work, and feels that liberal charges of racism and social injustice

are overblown. On the other hand, liberalism stresses social justice, and considers conservative emphases on moral virtue to be prudish and psychologically harmful. Each side, of course, thinks the other side is smug and self-righteous.

It is not only the political parties that fail to reflect this "whole cloth" Biblical agenda. The churches of America are often more controlled by the surrounding political culture than by the spirit of Jesus and the prophets. Conservative churches tend to concentrate on one set of sins, while liberal ones concentrate on another set. Jesus, like the Old Testament prophets, does not see two categories of morality. In Amos 2:7, we read, "They trample the heads of the poor; father and son go in to the same girl." The prophet condemns social injustice and sexual licentiousness in virtually the same breath (cf. Isaiah 5:8ff). Such denunciations cut across all current conventional political agendas. The Biblical perspective sees sexual immorality and material selfishness as both flowing from self-centeredness rather than God-centeredness.

Raymond Fung, an evangelist in Hong Kong, tells of how he was speaking to a textile worker about the Christian faith, and he urged him to come and visit a church. The man could not go to a service on Sunday without losing a day's wages, but he did so. After the service Fung and the man went to lunch. The worker

said, "Well, the sermon hit me." It had been about sin. "What the preacher said was true of me—laziness, a violent temper, and addiction to cheap entertainment." Fung held his breath, trying to control his excitement. Had the gospel message gotten through? He was disappointed. "Nothing was said about my boss," the man said to Fung. When the preacher had gone through the list of sins, he had said, "Nothing about how he employs child laborers, how he doesn't give us the legally required holidays, how he puts on false labels, how he forces us to do overtime. . . ." Fung knew that members of the management class were sitting in the congregation, but those sins were never mentioned. The textile worker agreed that he was a sinner, but he rejected the message of the church because he sensed its incompleteness. Harvie Conn, who related this story in one of his books, added that gospel preaching that targets some sins but not the sins of oppression "cannot possibly work among the overwhelming majority of people in the world, poor peasants and workers."[58]

Jesus's New Community

The early church responded to Jesus's calls for justice and mercy. The apostle Paul viewed ministry to the poor as so important that it was one of the last things

he admonished the Ephesian church to do before he left them for the last time. In his farewell address, Paul was able to ground this duty in the teaching of Jesus. "We must help the poor," he said, "remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'" (Acts 20:35). You don't use your "last words" without saying something that is all-important to you. For Paul it was: "Don't only preach—help the poor."

Though the church was no longer a nation-state like Israel, the New Testament writers recognized the concern for justice and mercy in the Mosaic legislation and applied it to the church community in a variety of ways. Many Mosaic laws worked toward diminishing the great gap that tends to grow between rich and poor. From the law of "Jubilee" (Leviticus 25) to the rules for gathering manna in Exodus 16, the principle was to increase "equality." When Paul wrote the Corinthian church to ask for an offering to relieve starving Christians in Palestine, he quoted Exodus 16:18 and then said, "At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality" (2 Corinthians 8:14).

The New Testament book of James contains some of the most severe condemnation of those who keep their wealth to themselves. James says to the rich: "You have hoarded wealth in the last days. . . . Look!

The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence" (James 5:1–6). This call could have been lifted right from Isaiah, Jeremiah, or Amos.

No Needy among Them

The book of Acts gives us the most extensive look at how the early Christians lived their lives together. The very earliest glimpse is in Acts 2:42–47. The gift of the Spirit is given in Acts 2:38, and what results is ***koinonia***—a well-known Greek word that is usually translated "fellowship." However, the meaning of the word is unpacked in verses 44–45: "All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone who had need." Since there were three thousand initial converts, according to Acts 2:41, it almost certainly does not mean they formed a commune and actually shared living quarters. Later, in Acts 4, we are told that those believers with more in the way of wealth and possessions frequently liquidated them and gave the cash to the apostles, who then distributed it to those members of the community who were poor (Acts 4:34–37). Because of this radical generosity,

there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales, and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.

Acts 4:34–35[59]

This statement is more significant than it looks. Remember the key Old Testament text, Deuteronomy 15, in which God declared that if his people obeyed him as they should, no permanent poverty could exist in their midst. "There should be no poor among you" (Deuteronomy 15:4). This was the pinnacle of the "social righteousness" legislation of the Old Testament, which expressed God's love for the vulnerable and his zeal to see poverty and want eliminated. It is remarkable, then, that Acts 4:34 is a direct quote from Deuteronomy 15:4. "It cannot be accidental that Luke, in his portrayal of the beginnings of the . . . community of the Holy Spirit, chose to describe them in words taken almost directly from [Deuteronomy 15:4]."[60] In Deuteronomy, believers were called to open their hands to the needy as far as there was need, until they were self-sufficient. The New Testament calls Christians to do the same (1 John 3:16–17; cf. Deuteronomy 15:7–8).

Acts gives us more insight into the love and justice of the early church. Just as in the Old Testament

a special class of officials was set apart to help with the needy—priests and Levites—so in the New Testament, some were set apart for the same work. The church in Jerusalem conducted a ministry called the "daily *diakonia*" (Acts 6:1). This was a daily distribution of food and other resources to poor widows who were fully supported by the church. This ministry grew until it became too big and complicated for the elders to administer, so they set apart a new group to lead it. Later in the epistles of Paul, those leading this ministry are called "deacons" (Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:8–13). The Greek word *diakonia* came to mean "humble service to practical needs" in the New Testament, and "diaconal ministry" was a crucial part of the community life of the early church.

But while Christians are to definitely care for the material needs of their brothers and sisters within the Christian community, are they under obligation to care for their poor neighbors, the poor of the world? It is true that the social legislation of the Old Testament is largely about caring for the needy inside the believing community. Also most examples of generosity in the New Testament are of care for the poor within the church, such as the support for widows (Acts 6:1–7; 1 Timothy 5:3–16). Even Jesus's parable of the Sheep and the Goats uses the test of caring for those whom Jesus calls "the least of these my broth-

ers," probably referring to poor believers. Some of this is common sense. Our first responsibility is to our own families and relations (1 Timothy 5:8), and our second responsibility is to other members of the community of faith (Galatians 6:10).

However, the Bible is clear that Christians' practical love, their generous justice, is not to be confined to only those who believe as we do. Galatians 6:10 strikes the balance when Paul says: "Do good to all people, especially the family of faith." Helping "all people" is not optional, it is a command. We don't have to look only to the New Testament to learn this. One of the four vulnerable classes protected by the Hebrew prophets was that of the immigrant. While foreigners residing in Israel could convert, the injunction to provide them with shelter and guard their legal rights was not qualified by whether they had entered the covenant or not. That showed that Israel's justice and compassion was not to be confined to only its own believing community.

But the most famous and powerful statement of Jesus on what it means to love our neighbor is found in his parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37). That important teaching deserves a chapter of its own.[61]