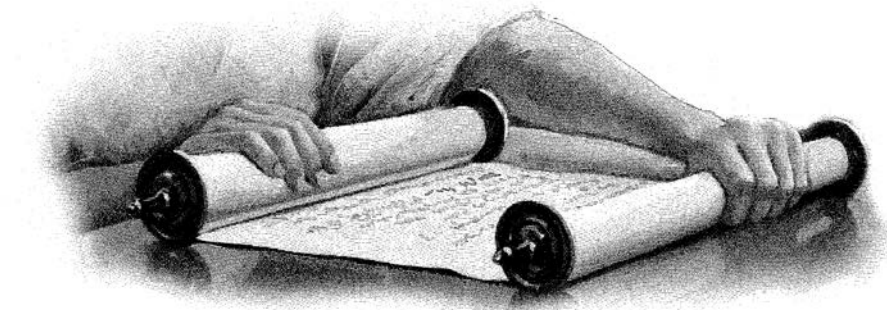


Justice¹ and Mercy in the Old Testament: Part 1



SABBATH—JULY 9

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Exodus 22:21–23; Exodus 23:2–9; Amos 8:4–7; Isaiah 1:13–17; Isaiah 58:1–14; Acts 20:35.

MEMORY VERSE: “He [the LORD] stands up for those who are beaten down. He gives food to hungry people. The LORD sets prisoners free. The LORD gives sight to those who are blind. The LORD lifts up those who feel helpless. The LORD loves those who do what is right. The LORD watches over the outsiders who live in our land. He takes good care of children whose fathers have died. He also takes good care of widows” (Psalm 146:7–9, NlrV).

MANY YEARS AGO ON A COLD DAY IN NEW YORK CITY, a ten-year-old boy, barefoot and very cold, watched through the window of a shoe store. A woman came to the boy and asked why he was looking so long in the window. The boy said that he was asking God to give him a pair of shoes. The woman took him by the hand into the store. The woman bought him a pair of shoes. As she turned to go, the surprised boy took her hand and tearfully asked, “Are you God’s wife?”—Adapted from <http://www.inspirationalstories.com/1/198.html>.

That little boy spoke more truth than he knew. God’s church *is* His bride, His wife. His character (thoughts; feelings; actions) is shown in the memory verse. As changed members of His church, we must reflect (show) that character. If we are truly His, we will greatly care about and give help to the poor and the powerless.

DEFINITIONS

1. justice—the process or result of using laws to fairly judge and punish crimes and criminals.

MERCY AND JUSTICE: SIGNS OR MARKS OF GOD'S PEOPLE (Exodus 22:21–23)

Even in early Israel, justice was an important part of God's law. It was His idea of perfection for His people. Justice was God's plan for all humans from the beginning. A world of social justice is a world where basic needs are met and where people become happy, successful, and peaceful.

Read Exodus 22:21–23; Exodus 23:2–9; Leviticus 19:10; Proverbs 14:31; and Proverbs 29:7. In your own words, write what they say about mercy and justice.

Mercy and justice are also important parts of the Sabbath laws given to Israel in the time of Moses. God outlined three kinds of Sabbaths.

How is the idea of mercy and justice shown in each of these Sabbaths? Exodus 20:8–10; Exodus 23:10, 11; Leviticus 25:8–55.

1. Instructions in keeping the seventh-day Sabbath give equal opportunity for everyone to rest, including servants, animals, and foreigners (outsiders).

2. Every seven years, the Sabbath year was a time for canceling debts, for showing kindness to the poor, and for freeing slaves. God instructed His people to be kind to animals during the Sabbath year (read Leviticus 25:6, 7).

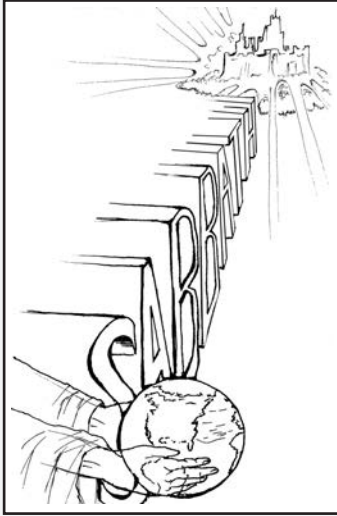
3. The year of jubilee (a celebration) came on the fiftieth year, after seven Sabbath years. Property that had been sold was restored (given back) to the first owner. Debts were forgiven. And prisoners and slaves were set free. Jubilee made all people equal and gave everyone an opportunity to make a new start. It was a “safeguard . . . for the people against their becoming too rich or poor.” —Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Ministry [Work Done for God] of Healing*, page 185.

Here, in Hebrew history, we can learn about how justice and mercy worked together to help people who were not as fortunate² as others.

DEFINITIONS

2. fortunate—having good things happen.

THE UNIVERSAL³ TRUTH OF THE SABBATH (Genesis 2:1–3)



The Sabbath will point back forever toward Creation and forward to the Cross and the new earth.

DEFINITIONS

3. universal—true at all times or in all places and available for everyone.

4. restoration—the act or process of returning something to its original (first) condition or the way it was in the beginning when it was first made.

5. ceremonial—having to do with a formal act or event that is part of a social or religious occasion.

Read Genesis 2:1–3. What does this verse tell us about how universal the Sabbath is?

If we truly honor the Sabbath, we will not be satisfied with only our own rest (Exodus 23:12), redemption (salvation) (Deuteronomy 5:12–15), and restoration⁴ in the new earth (Isaiah 66:22, 23). Indeed, the seventh-day Sabbath tells us that God is the Creator and Rest-Giver to all who live on this earth. The universal truth of the Sabbath rest suggests that all of us, rich and poor, are all equal in God’s eyes.

Also, as we learned yesterday, justice applies to weekly Sabbaths, to sabbatical (having to do with the Sabbath) years, and to the year of jubilee. The principles (important rules) behind the three Sabbaths described in Leviticus 23 and 25 also apply to Christians. The seventh-day Sabbath will point back forever to Creation. It also points forward to the Cross and the new earth. It will strengthen our relationship with our merciful Creator and Savior. So it brings us closer to all those less fortunate ones whom God deeply loves. These are people who have deep needs, who are poor or suffering.

Please note that the Sabbath year and the year of jubilee show eternal principles. But these principles do not mean that we are meant to keep these festivals now. We are not. But the seventh-day Sabbath is forever. We are meant to keep it holy always. It was started at the Creation in a pre-Fall world. But the year of jubilee and the Sabbath-year festivals are among the ceremonial⁵ Sabbaths that were a “shadow of things to come” (Colossians 2:17). They point forward to the ministry and sacrifice of Jesus, and then they come to an end with His death on the cross. But these ceremonial Sabbaths do point to a principle about how we should treat others, especially those in need. As a saved people, Israel had a responsibility to be a light to the world. It was God’s plan for Israel to show forth His mercy to others without favoring anyone. With thanksgiving the people of Israel were to show God’s character to those who did not know Him.

Read Amos 8:4–7. What was going on here, and how can we make sure that we are not guilty of doing the same thing to others? Thinking about what you have learned, how important are these words: “‘Surely I will never forget any of their works’ ”?

PROPHETIC⁶ VOICE: PART 1 (Proverbs 31:8, 9)

“ ‘Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute [poor]. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy’ ” (Proverbs 31:8, 9, NIV). How do we take the principles here and apply (use) them for today?

So far this week we have noted that God wants His people to show His character of mercy and justice as part of His idea of what perfect behavior for His people should be. The Hebrew prophets (special messengers) often spoke up for the needy. They warned God’s people to stop giving others the idea that God does not care for the outsider and those who are mistreated. In fact, in God’s eyes, unselfish service is equal to true worship.

Read Isaiah 1:13–17. What does this announcement say about God’s idea of true worship? How can we use our understanding of this idea in our lives today? In other words, what should these verses say to us now?

Many of the Old Testament prophets pointed to future events beyond their lifetimes. But they also heavily focused on the importance of making spiritual changes and unselfish service in the present. The prophetic voice of God’s servants rang loudest when His people made great efforts to worship but did not show God’s mercy for suffering people around them. One cannot imagine a worse witness than those who are too busy “worshiping” God that they do not have time to help those in need. Christians can show this kind of “worship” to the Lord by ministering to (serving) the needs of others.



In God’s eyes, unselfish service is equal to true worship.

DEFINITIONS

6. prophetic—having to do with the special messages God gives to His people.

PROPHETIC VOICE: PART 2 (Isaiah 58:2)

Isaiah 58 gives a special prophetic message of rebuke (scold) and hope for God's people in Isaiah's time and for us today.

After an announcement that He is upset with His people (read Isaiah 58:1), how does God describe the people to whom He is speaking? Read Isaiah 58:2.



In giving to others we are blessed ourselves.

We do not know the exact “tone of voice” God used here. But it is clear that the Lord is rebuking (scolding) the people for their two-faced (deceiving) show of holiness and faith because He knows how false it all is. The NIV translates it like this: “ ‘For day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken [forgotten; left behind] the commands of its God’ ” (Isaiah 58:2, NIV).

Read Isaiah 58:3–14. What else is the Lord saying to these people about what is wrong with their religious practices (in this case, fasting)? What is the bigger problem here?

Worship often can be self-centered (selfish): *Lord, do this for me and do that for me.* And, of course, there is a time and place for praying to the Lord for our own personal needs. But what the Lord is saying here is that true worship will include reaching out to “the hungry,” to “the suffering,” and to the “poor.” But the surprise is that this ministry to others blesses both the receivers of the help and those giving the help. Read what the verses say about what happens to those who reach out to help people who are in need. We are blessed ourselves when we minister and give to others. Who has not experienced receiving the blessing of these promises from God? Who has not seen what joy and satisfaction and hope come to those who help others who cannot help themselves? It is hard to imagine a better way to show the character of Christ to the world.

Read Acts 20:35. How have you had the real experience of these words in your own ministry to others?

A FORCE FOR GOOD (Psalm 82:3)

Having the truth is not enough. In Isaiah 58, God's people are eager to take part in their religious ceremonies and practices. But they still are weak in showing their faith in real life. God is calling His church today to be a force for good. This repeats the call of the Old Testament prophets to show the truth about His character.

Read the following verses. As a local church and as a world church, how can we do what we have been called by God to do in this area? Read Psalm 82:3 and Isaiah 1:17.

Here is an example of how one church made a big difference in its community. The church is in a city where there are many shootings and deaths. In 2011, the clear prophetic voice of the church's pastor rang out during a city ministry congress (gathering) in a large city. Here are several of the things he said during his speech: "Christians must stop the death march!" He talked about the Bible story of Jesus stopping the funeral train for the widow of Nain's son (Luke 7:11–17). Then he explained how the church could not sit and do nothing while crime and shootings became worse in their community. He asked his hearers, "Are we simply a church that stands up to give funeral services?" Instead, we need to ask ourselves if we are a church that works to lessen suffering.

This church is also very active in community growth. For seven years the church choir went to the streets of their community. They sang, passed out flyers, and offered the services of the church to those who had needs. The church helped their neighborhood in many ways by greatly helping those in need. Through many different programs, the church made a big difference in the community.

This local church is just one example of the many ways that we, as a church, can minister to and heal our communities.

What can your church do to help the needy in your community?



God calls the church today to show the truth about His character.

ADDITIONAL THOUGHT: Read Ellen G. White, “The Law Given to Israel,” pages 307–314; “God’s Care for the Poor,” pages 530–536, in *Patriarchs [Forefathers and Leaders] and Prophets*.

Justice and mercy are found all throughout the Old Testament. For example, study Deuteronomy 24:10–22. Read the special instructions given in these cases. We can understand clearly that the Lord cares for the poor, for the workers, and for those in debt. This caring attitude is shown in clear and useful instructions on what to do and what not to do in certain situations: for example, how to help someone in debt or how to help a poor worker. These ideas of how to help others are very important to God.

“Remember that you were slaves in Egypt. That is why I command you to do this” (Deuteronomy 24:22, NIV). As Christians, we must always remember the mercy and kindness that God has given to us. We need to be ready to serve those who need our service and help, out of the richness and fullness of what we have in Christ (Ephesians 3:19; Colossians 2:10).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

① The fourth commandment says that servants should rest on the Sabbath. How does this teach the idea that all humans are equal before the Lord? How does this help us to understand how we should fairly treat those who work for us, or those who are under our control? Also, how does the universal (true at all times and true for everyone) truth of Christ’s death on the cross show that all humans are equal in God’s eyes?

② “When the mind of Christ becomes our mind, and His works become our works, we shall be able to keep the fast described by the prophet Isaiah: ‘Here is the way I want you to fast. Set free those who are held by chains without any reason. Untie the ropes that hold people as slaves. Set free those who are crushed’ [Isaiah 58:6, NIV]. Find out what the poor and suffering need. Then, in love and kindness, help them to find courage and hope and confidence [faith] by sharing with them the good things that God has given you.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, in *Pacific Union Recorder*, July 21, 1904. How do we do this? How do we share what we have been given in Christ but do so in useful ways that can truly help those in need?