Social Justice
5-Part Bible Study

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1. Hebrew Foundations – Justice Bedrock
2. Jesus Boundaries – Justice Extremities
4. Global Landscape – Justice Initiatives
5. Holy Vista – Justice Reigns
1. Hebrew Foundations – Justice Bedrock

Opening: What is it about injustice that bothers you most? Why?

The Hebrew scriptures stand apart from other religious writings of the time with its repeated theme to care for the outcast, marginalized and powerless.

The Jewish ethic is distinct – it insists on the dignity of the poor, and it commands us to resist any temptation to view the poor as somehow different from ourselves.

The poor person is our sibling.

Rabbi Jill Jacobs – Jewish Attitudes Towards Poverty

Scripture:

DT 27:19
Cursed is the one who withholds justice from the alien, the fatherless or the widow.

JER 22:3
This is what the LORD says: Do what is just and right. Rescue from the hand of his oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the alien, the fatherless or the widow.
EZ 22:29
The people of the land practice extortion and commit robbery; they oppress the poor and needy and mistreat the alien, denying them justice.

PS 103:6
The LORD works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed.

PROV 31:8-9
Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. [9] Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.

AM 5:23, 24
Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. [24] But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!

MIC 6:8 ‘And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.’

Discuss: Who are the array of people mentioned? What do these passages teach about how God feels towards injustice?
Hebrew Scripture is clear – God will judge His people according to the way in which they care for those who have no social or family structure to care for them.

The thinking here is that if God’s people are not caring for the poor, then they are accomplices in oppression, and God will take up the cause of the needy against their oppressors.

Caring for the poor is one of the major themes of the Old Testament that prepares us for the person and work of Jesus.

Scott Reid – *Caring for the Poor and Weak*

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**Summary:** The world is fallen and filled with injustice. Yet, in this same broken world God calls his people to justice.

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**Contemporary Marginalized Groups**

- Children
- Women
- Elderly
- Ethnic Minorities
- Immigrants
- Refugees and Asylum Seekers
- Disabled
- Poor
- Religious Minorities
- LGBT Community
- Indigenous People
- Migrant Workers
- Trafficked People

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**Discuss:** Which group stands out for you with special compassion? What other groups might we add to this list?
A Paradigm

**Social Services**

Social Service – compassionate response of help to individual or family

**Social Action**

Social Action – proactive movement to address wider community needs

**Social Justice**

Social Justice – challenge root causes of systemic inequity and exploitation

**Discussion:** Where and how have you seen examples of these 3 in operation?
2. Jesus Boundaries – Justice Extremities

We first looked at the Hebrew foundations of justice, the bedrock. With the coming of Jesus we see another dimension, now lived out on the very margins of society.

**Opening:** Identify a time when you were excluded—an occasion when you were an outsider. How did you feel?

With sharp clarity, it is evident that Jesus does not deviate from the Hebrew Scriptures, which he says he ‘came to fulfill.’ (MT 5) He personally tends and cares for the very same kind of vulnerable people that God cares for in the Old Testament.

‘He showed throughout his ministry the particular interest in the poor and the downtrodden that God always had.’ (Tim Keller – *Generous Justice*)

Look at some examples from the Gospels.

**Scripture**

His instructions to the disciples:
MT 10:7-8 Preach this message: ‘The kingdom of heaven is near.’ [8] Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give.

His contrast with the values and behavior of the religious leaders:
MT 23:23 ‘Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cummin. But
you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former.

A central parable and teaching:
MT 25:35-40 ‘I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’ [...] ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’

Prophesied before his birth, attributes of the Messiah:
LK 1:51-53 ‘He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. [52] He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. [53] He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.’

Pronounced at the start of his public ministry:
LK 4:18 (IS 61) ‘The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, [19] to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.’

A parable with a specific application:
LK 18:1-8 In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. [3] And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, ‘Grant me justice against my adversary.’ [...] I will see that she gets justice [...] And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? [8] I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly.
Discuss: Who are the array of people mentioned? What do these passages teach about how Jesus feels towards injustice?

An Early Pattern – Luke 5-8

- A leper (5:12-14)
- A paralytic (5:18-26)
- The sick and demonized (6:17-18)
- A widow (7:11-16)
- An ‘unclean’ woman (7:36-50)
- A demoniac (8:26-38)

His focus – people living on the margins of society, isolated from community.

Discuss: Which person especially stands out for you? Why? What other contemporary marginalized and isolated people might we add to this list?

The IHQ publication *The Salvation Army in the Body of Christ* contains an emphasis and focus on the marginalized of our world:
We believe that the practices of The Salvation Army have much in common with the practices of other churches, but that being raised up by God for a distinctive work, the Army has been led of God to adopt the following combination of characteristics:

[...] its worldwide tradition of service [...] without discrimination or preconditions, to the distressed, needy and marginalized, together with appropriate advocacy in the public domain on matters of social justice.

**Living Right While Righting Wrongs**

Jesus’ mission is captured in a single vision with two dimensions: His hope for a restored humanity envisions well-being for people who are *spiritually poor* and people who are *socially poor*.

In their midst, righteousness and justice mark the events of his days and nights. Jesus lives right and makes life right with others.

*Jesus and Justice*, ISJC 2010

‘We cannot divide social action, discipleship and the call to bring people to faith in Jesus Christ – they are all part of the Christian journey.’

Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury

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**Closing Discussion – Social Outsiders Today**

**Our Church** - Identify people who are outsiders. They may be tolerated, but are they really welcomed?

**Our Nation** - Identify people groups who are excluded—who are outsiders. Be specific and think broadly.

**Our World** - Identify people groups who are outsiders. Give attention to those who are subject to stigma and discrimination.

Reminder: Jesus embodies the justice values proclaimed by God in the Old Testament; indeed, it seems evident he deliberately interacts with the marginalized of society.

He now incarnates the compassion and justice of God. This is a major shift: from theory to practice.

This is no neat, hermetically sealed religious textbook. Immediately apparent is the sheer volume and variety of people.

Discuss: Where have you seen, or been part of, a group of people that included a varied range of ages, ethnicities or social groupings? What issues emerged in the group as a result?

The cast of characters contained in the gospel narratives are remarkably diverse. Consequently, they interact with Jesus for numerous reasons:

- by desperate need
- from curiosity
- with searching faith

We can trace a pattern that provides a theological framework for us.
**Service – Without Discrimination**
In the gospels we read of *instinctive acts of compassion* for hurting people:

- the hungry (MK 8:1-3)
- the sick (MT 14:13-14)

Here are people with raw human need. Jesus meets the need. There is no required faith commitment or change of heart.

The starting point when offering care is the conviction that all people are precious in the sight of God.

**Welcome – Without Condition**
In the gospels we read of *welcome, hospitality and kindness* for alienated people:

- tax collectors (MT 9:9-12)
- a sinful woman (LK 7:36-39)

Here are people inquisitive and interested in the things of God. Jesus responds with openness and inclusivity.

Giving a warm welcome to the sincerely seeking person is our first instinct. God welcomes us in spite of our sins. We welcome others too.

**Wholeness – Without Doubt**
In the gospels we read of *ready acceptance into the Kingdom of God* for marginalized people:

- a thief (LK 19:1-9)
- a multiple divorcee (JN 4:4-9)
Here are people who openly acknowledge Jesus as Lord. Their lives change. As such, they enter into the Kingdom of God.

The willingness to follow Jesus as Lord is transformational. A person moves from death to life, from blindness to sight, from being lost to being found.

Discuss: Let’s wrestle with the paradigm – what are its strengths and vulnerabilities? How might it be applied to The Salvation Army?

Social Justice and the Gospel

‘The issue of evangelism versus the social gospel is a non-issue’

Christ stated firmly that he came to preach the Gospel to the poor, to heal the broken hearted, to minister to the blind, the widow, the prisoner and to preach the acceptable year of the Lord.

‘You can’t split the Gospel. We must love God – and we must love our neighbor.’ —

‘There are four ways to look at the relationship of evangelism and social justice.

− Social justice or evangelism. This is not relevant to society as evident in scripture.

− Social justice is evangelism. This is specious because we must be born again spiritually.

− Social justice for evangelism. This reduces social justice to manipulation and bait for religious purposes.
Social justice and evangelism. We must care for the whole person. We give bread, but we recognize that people do not live by bread alone.

‘Jesus did not feed the hungry on the hillside so that they would believe in Him. He had no strings attached to His giving. He gave out of love.’

General Eva Burrows

Discuss: Even with a commitment to social justice, we must recognize that ‘compassion is no substitute for conversion.’

Final Thought: If people are constantly falling off a cliff, we could place ambulances under the cliff or build a fence on the top of the cliff.
4. Global Landscape – Justice Initiatives

We arrive at an important juncture in our Social Justice journey – the birth of the Church.

- Hebrew Scriptures – God speaks
- The Gospels – Jesus acts
- Kingdom Citizens – People respond

From a divine voice, to a solitary example, now to the initiatives of groups of people across cultures and boundary lines at the same time.

The expansion goes hand-in-hand with the concurrent multiplied story of salvation. As the Church takes root and grows, organized social actions begin.

Discuss: What organized social action initiatives have we seen, or participated in? How successful were they? What did you feel as you participated?

Scriptures:
Acts 4:32-35 (Utopia)
All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. [...] 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 [35] and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.
Acts 6:1 (Organization and oversight)
The Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

Acts 9:36 (Individual initiative)
In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (which, when translated, is Dorcas) who was always doing good and helping the poor.

Acts 10:31 (Individual initiative)
A man in shining clothes stood before me [31] and said, ‘Cornelius, God has heard your prayer and remembered your gifts to the poor.

Acts 11:29-30 (Antioch church – famine group fund raising)
The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea. [30] This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

Acts 20:35 (A principle established)
I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.'

ROM 15:26-27 (Cross-cultural fund-raising initiative and sharing)
Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. [27] They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them.

GAL 2:9-10 (Key component of Gentile ministry)
They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the Jews. [10] All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.
2 COR 8:3-4 (Macedonian group generosity)
I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, [4] they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints.

JAM 1:27 (Pure religion)
Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

Discuss: What individuals or group efforts especially stand out for you? What can we learn?

Effective intervention must include strategies that alter social circumstances and outside forces as they contribute to suffering.

William Booth, 1890

Social Evils The Army Has Challenged

– Sex Trafficking and the Age of Consent – ‘Maiden Tribute’
– Destitution and Unemployment – the Submerged Tenth
– Victorian Sweat Labor – the Matchbox Factory
– Japanese Brothels – Salvationist Samurai
– Indian Criminal Tribes – ‘Crims’ to Silk Weavers
– Victorian Abandoned Child Scheme – School Legislation
– French Penal Colony – Devil’s Island

Carvosso Gauntlet

Discuss: What social evils does – or should – the army challenge today?
Justice is a Biblically defined, theological, Christian issue. It’s not a social construct per se. So much of American Christianity has kept issues of justice and society in kind of a Marxist category.

It is the word of God that defines what justice issues are.

We have the most prophetic edge because it is actually the word of God that delineates what justice is and what it’s not.

Charlie Dates, Chicago pastor

The 2018 ‘Statement on Social Justice and the Gospel,’ signed by 3000 evangelical leaders, criticizes social justice as containing questionable theories ‘permeating our culture and making inroads in Christ’s Church.’

One statement organizer says social justice is a ‘distraction from the gospel’ and a ‘dangerous heresy.’

Discuss: What is going on here?
5. Holy Vista – Justice Reigns

**Thesis:** We carry within us an innate sense of right and wrong, a conviction that oppressors should be held accountable and the weak protected.

We want justice.

**Discuss:** Describe a time, incident or circumstance where you instinctively reacted against an injustice. Was there resolution? Was justice served?

In addition to addressing injustices in society, biblical justice holds eternity in mind – the resolution of all things and all time. One day there will be perfect justice, carried out by a perfectly holy and just God.

Christine Erickson, Sharedhope International

**Scripture:**
Eschatology is a frequent theme in Biblical literature. In depicting justice, it often contains the merging or reversal of opposites.

**Adversaries Coexist – IS 11:1-9**

[4] With righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. [...]

[6] The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them.

**Discuss:** What does Isaiah communicate about justice in this passage?
Opposites Reverse – IS 40:1-4
[40:1] Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. [...] [3] A voice of one calling: ‘In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. [4] Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain.’

Discuss:
Every valley shall be raised up – the downtrodden elevated
Every mountain and hill made low – the haughty humbled
Rough ground shall become level – the hardship eased
Rugged places a plain – the obstacles removed

Pain Ceases – REV 21:1-4
I saw a new heaven and a new earth [...] [2] I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. [3] And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. [4] He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’

Discuss: What does John communicate about justice in this passage?

Militant Justice
William Booth took the view that poverty and sin go together:
- the man who is poor is more likely to take refuge in drink
- the woman who is poor is more likely to go onto the streets
It seemed to him to be self-evident. Booth said if we are going to attack the devil, we must attack those things which the devil uses as his allies.

Roy Hattersley, MP

Theological Synthesis

The Trinity – undivided in essence, may provide a strong missional paradigm for us:

‘I Am Who I Am’ – self-revelation of God the Father to Moses
= ‘I’ll Be There’ (Martin Buber)

‘the Word became flesh’ – the incarnation of Jesus
= ‘moved into the neighborhood’ (The Message)

‘the comforter’ – the Holy Spirit
= ‘the one called alongside to help’

Salvationist Trinitarian Justice Mission Statement

We’ll be there,
moved into the neighborhood,
come alongside to help.