

ascribe

A Series on Worship

Ascribe Part Three: Worship and Justice

By Pastor Dave Fields

Luke 1:46-55

“This song of Mary is the oldest Advent hymn. It’s also the most passionate, most vehement, one might almost say, most revolutionary Advent hymn ever sung. It is not the gentle, sweet, dreamy Mary that we so often see portrayed in pictures, but the passionate, powerful, proud, enthusiastic Mary, who speaks here. None of the sweet, sugary, or childish tones that we find so often in our Christmas hymns, but a hard, strong, uncompromising song of bringing down rulers from their thrones and humbling the lords of this world, of God’s power and of the powerlessness of men. These are the tones of the prophetic women of the Old Testament: Deborah, Judith, Miriam, coming alive in the mouth of Mary.”

– Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Advent Sermon “*God in the Manger at Bethlehem.*”

I. Mary’s Song

The humble and hungry: “A reference to economic poverty and political oppression is included.”

– I.H. Marshall

The proud and the rich: “The Messiah acted on their behalf by bringing in the kingdom of God with its associated blessings and by pronouncing God’s judgment on the *proud* (v.51) and *rich* (v.53), who would have been understood as owing their position [of power and wealth] to injustice. – I.H. Marshall

Living with self-at-the-centre is what leads to *injustice*, to using others to gain wealth, power, and status. God’s desire is for all people to be treated with equality – that the image of God, that all humans bear within us – would be honoured and respected.

Righteousness (Hebrew is *tsadiqah*) is about having “right-relationship” with other people. It’s about treating others as those who bear the image of God, of respecting their dignity they deserve.

Justice (Hebrew is *mishpat*) can mean “retributive” justice – the consequences for committing a crime. But in the Bible, it most often it speaks of “restorative” justice, or “distributive” justice.

And *that* means seeking out and drawing near to those who have been mistreated or taken advantage of, who have been in oppressive situations. It is actively seeking to address the very reasons people are in these situations. It’s about advocating for those who are vulnerable and seeking to change systems or situations that keep people from thriving.

“This is what the Lord says: Do what is just [*mishpat*] and right [*tsadiqah*]. Rescue from the hand of the oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the foreigner, the fatherless or widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place.” – Jeremiah 22:3

“Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me.” – Isaiah 1:13

“When you spread your hands in prayer, I hide my eyes from you; even when you offer many prayers, I am not listening. Your hands are full of blood! Wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil out of my sight; stop doing wrong.” – Isaiah 1:15-16

“Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow.” – Isaiah 1:17

1. God will not accept the worship or prayer of people who are unrepentantly doing wrong.
2. God calls his people to be those who learn to do right and who seek justice. To actively defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless and the widow.

Key Point 1: True worship of the true God is authenticated by how we live – when we adopt God’s heart for the world, his vision for justice.

No one embodies that “proud” and “rich” in Mary’s day more than King Herod. He was a sort of “false king of the Jews,” appointed by the Romans, and corrupt to the core. In that time, he was your definition of power-hungry. And the “cast down the mighty” language comes into sharp focus when we consider the geography of Bethlehem.

“Mary would have seen Herod the Great’s majestic palatial resort which was known as Herodium. It was, and still is, an impossible site to miss from any part of Bethlehem. For you see, Herodium sits atop a manmade mountain nearly twenty-five hundred feet high. At the time, it was the largest palatial complex in the Roman world.” - Jason Porterfield

II. Mary’s Son

The song Mary sings is not about a *human solution* to a merely human problem. Mary, who has agreed to play her part in God’s redeeming work, gives praise to God. “My soul glorifies the Lord.” She knows this world-healing work is a God-sized, God-planned, God-fulfilled plan. There is a deep sense of *trust* in what God is up to.

Key Point 2: God gets all the glory.

Mary sings this song of praise *to God*, with longing, and confidence, because God is accomplishing what God intends to.

¹⁶ He [Jesus] went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

¹⁸ “The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,

to set the oppressed free, [Is 58:6]

¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." [Is 61]

²⁰ Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. ²¹ He began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." – Luke 4:16-21

Did Mary know *how* her son would bring this justice? Like, did she expect the Messiah would use His might to forcefully remove rulers from their positions of power? And did she realize that His mercy and salvation would extend beyond her own people?

The likely answer to those questions is, well, probably not. She would almost certainly share the expectations that the Jewish people had – that the Messiah, God's promised ruler – would be like king David. And that means a ruler with hands bloodied from battle.

Key Point 3: The justice Jesus brings doesn't create new oppressors.

Unfortunately, in the history of the church, sometimes that hasn't been the case. But that only happens when the meaning of the cross is spun for imperialistic purposes – when it was not seen for what it was; that is, the site where God forgives his enemies and demonstrates his love for those who aim at destruction. And the fact that he tells his followers to do the same for our enemies.

Jesus was the only person to live with perfect justice, and he was the one who bore the injustice of the cross to bring us back to God and make us a people of people.

- What are the areas of legitimate injustice today? The places where people are mistreated, taken advantage of, or where one group benefits at the expense of another?
- Are there ways that I benefit at the expense of others?
- Are there ways that I need to consider giving – to using the resources God has given me to meet needs.

When I see people become aware of these issues, and begin to engage with their resources, they seem to "come alive" to what they are made for. Because we were made for God, and to live by God's ways.

Key Point 4: Jesus' hands shape how we use ours.

These hands are now designated to the task of healing, not hurting. These hands will not do violence, but will do justice, will be offering mercy, will join my feet in walking humbly with God.

Discussion:

Open Up

In my experience, not many Christian people have been exposed to this idea that worship and justice are deeply connected.

What are your initial thoughts about the connection between worship and justice? Does this excite, challenge, inspire you? Why do you feel that way?

Dig In

1. **Read Isaiah 58:1-5.** The prophet Isaiah has been asked by God to “declare to my people their rebellion and to the descendants of Jacob their sins” (58:1). What is at the heart of God’s challenge here? Summarize in your own words the issue with the way God’s people are approaching worship here.
2. **Read Isaiah 58:6-14.** How does this text connect gathered worship – what we *say* about God – and our lives in the “other six days” of the week?

Put It into Practice

3. How are you personally encouraged or challenged by this text? Are there ways that God may be calling you to engage with your resources and time?
4. How does the gospel – what God does for us through Jesus – change our hearts and shape us to be the sort of people who worship God through deeds of love and mercy and justice in the world (see Titus 3:1-8)? Why does that matter?

Bonus question (for if you have time). I have heard this objection: “Well, all this focus on justice means we are not doing evangelism – not telling people about Jesus.” Based on our study or your own experience, what would you say to someone who had that objection?

Closing Prayer: Take time to praise God for making our salvation possible from beginning to end through the finished work of Jesus in the power of the Spirit. Thank God that Jesus did, in our place, what we had failed to do, and now, by the work of the Spirit in us, gives us the power to live out our good purposes in the world.