

PROVERBS



“The Just Society will be one in which all of our people will have the means and the motivation to participate. The Just Society will be one in which personal and political freedom will be more securely ensured than it has ever been in the past. The Just Society will be one in which the rights of minorities will be safe from the whims of intolerant majorities. The Just Society will be one in which those regions and groups which have not fully shared in the country’s affluence will be given a better opportunity. The Just Society will be one where such urban problems as housing and pollution will be attacked through the application of new knowledge and new techniques. The Just Society will be one in which our Indian and Inuit population will be encouraged to assume the full rights of citizenship through policies which will give them both greater responsibility for their own future and more meaningful equality of opportunity. The Just Society will be a united Canada, united because all of its citizens will be actively involved in the development of a country where equality of opportunity is ensured and individuals are permitted to fulfill themselves in the fashion they judge best...”

So said Canada’s 15th Prime Minister, Pierre Trudeau. With noble aspirations and a desire to see a more just society, Canada embarked on an attempt to make a better, more equitable society for all. And the reality is that Canadians have had many social programs that have made this country better. But the just society is not easy to achieve, nor is it reasonable to expect that a government will be just unless its leaders are just.

Proverbs speaks to the need for justice, and what Proverbs does is advocates for just leadership in society. Proverbs is not naive to think that we can change the world one heart at a time. Proverbs knows that the change that is needed begins with just leadership. As a manual for training just leaders, Proverbs points us to a better way. What is that better way?

What is God Like?

If you’re trying to imagine what God is like, it is important for us to understand how he reveals himself to his people. First, we remember that God chose a nation that was small, disadvantaged, and challenged. He chose them when they were nothing and made them great. So when we hear of what God is like in Proverbs, we hear a similar perspective.

God is described as the Redeemer or Defender of the fatherless in 23:10-11. He protects those who don’t have protection. God doesn’t help those who help themselves; he helps those who can’t help themselves. In the same way, God is described as a defender and protector of those who can’t protect themselves in 22:22-23.

God is so concerned about justice because he is just. Proverbs 28:5 tells us that understanding justice comes from knowing the Lord, and implied in this is that justice comes from God himself. And the best way to know about something is to go to its source.

What are people like?

Several times we are told in Proverbs that the Lord is the Maker of the rich and poor (22:2; 17:5). So to mock the poor because of their poverty is to insult the Lord. Humans are made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26) and because we are made in his image, rich and poor alike have an equal standing and value before God.

God has also given humans authority to rule – as 21:1 says, the Lord gives power and it is under his control. Therefore, when people become powerful, they are to use that power to serve others, not to oppress.

But because of sin, people use their power to oppress others. They can even think they are doing right and end up causing great harm. They can use right principles in wrong ways. Sin is very deceitful, and so the Lord warns leaders in Proverbs over and over to beware of the corrupting nature of power. Part of the two paths that Proverbs speaks about (14:12; 16:25) is the caution of power. People think that they know the best way, but because humans are fallen, they need to fear the Lord (1:7) to know his ways.

Even in having power, Proverbs is written for the powerful with the perspective that they need to learn how to use power from the Lord (1:3). If we are to respect the poor and needy, then let's consider

What are the Causes of Injustice?

Contrary to political views on the right or on the left, Proverbs presents a complex image of why people are poor. First, people can be poor because of their own choices. Proverbs warns against a luxurious lifestyle or indulgence (21:17). You can become poor because you can't control your spending and end up in massive debt. You can also be poor because of a failure to work (24:33-34).

But there are other reasons why people struggle with poverty. Human sin causes poverty, and Proverbs highlights the cautions those who have much. Proverbs says that people can become poor because others lie (19:22) rather than be committed to God and to faithfulness. People will often lie to protect their own reputation and resources at the expense of others.

Similarly, Proverbs warns about injustice – bad laws are a big cause of poverty. Throughout the Old Testament, God warned about not paying fair wages (Jer. 22:13), loans with high interest (Exod. 22:25-27), legal systems that were partial (Lev. 19:15), and prejudice (Exod. 22:21; 23:9).

So the problem of sin is complex. The reasons people struggle with poverty are often intertwined. I consider how complex the problem of poverty is in the United States. When people live in a certain neighbourhood, their children have to go to a particular school. If that school is in a poor neighbourhood, it doesn't receive as much funding from the property taxes around it because poor families don't earn very much. So the cycle of poverty is perpetuated by a system that does not give equitably.

Or what happens when some sort of disaster comes along? In the ancient world, a calamity could happen and in a world without insurance, people could be in ruin (17:5). Today, as much as we have insurance, we have the problem of people who take advantage of insurance claims and insurance companies who try to minimize abuse by having narrow parameters for compensation. So the problem of injustice is complex. Sin is both personal and can be institutionalized, and as Christians we should resist the ways that the right or left make us think that the problem is only systems or only individuals and laziness.

What are some ways that we can be just?

First, before we can talk about being just, we have to know what is just and what is not. Our society does not know God, and as a result we will institutionalize injustice in our laws, courts, and our society. Proverbs 28:5 says that justice comes from knowing God. So the more you know God, the more you will know what it means to act justly.

Second, the next and easiest way to be involved in justice is to be generous. Proverbs 28:8; 22:9; 28:27 all commend generosity. Here is what is crucial for us to understand: justice commends generosity but does not commend taking from the rich to give to the poor. The redistribution of wealth that is often advocated in politics is merely institutionalized theft. The story of Robin Hood is not a good story – it is a story justifying theft. But we can be generous towards various causes. Here at CBC we have found several ways to help you to be generous.

There is generosity of resources. I know many people here are involved with giving to causes to help those in need. Compassion Canada is a great organization that helps those in Canada connect with poverty in the developing world. Having a sponsor child through a legitimate organization ensures that children and their families receive education, support, funding, water, clothes, and so much more. We also support some crisis pregnancy centres with our Baby Bottle campaign. Our women's ministry has often spearheaded this, helping women who are pregnant and need support get the kind of help that they need to preserve the life of a child. Our Mercy Ministry has also actively engaged in giving people resources as well as helping families who have needed assistance. The stories here are many, but one I will highlight is how the mercy ministry recently worked with a family so that they could have access in and out of their home with ease. With money, time, and some construction skills, a family was blessed in a great way.

There is also the opportunity to be generous in time and service. As a church, we support a local ministry called Ark Aid. The Ark seeks to provide both physical and spiritual support to those who have found themselves in need of a meal, clothes, and encouragement. Many from here have gone to serve meals and have spent time talking with and dignifying those who find themselves on the streets of London for various reasons. Others of you have supported New Life Prison Ministry and have corresponded with those who have been incarcerated and find themselves needing a change of direction in life by helping them discover the truths of the Bible.

I have chatted with Paul Bradley as well. Paul is working on connecting Christians with opportunities to use their services as believers to assist those who cannot. If you would like to know how you could offer your skills to serve those who are in need, I highly recommend you talk with Paul.

Finally, the hardest thing to do but most crucial thing that is needed is to speak for those who do not have a voice. At the end of Proverbs, in 31:6-9, we have a word of what it looks like to be actively engaged in justice. Caring for those who are in need means relieving their suffering, and this is done in two ways. First, v. 6 commends providing relief to someone who is physically suffering. Giving strong drink has the idea of administering medical help. As a church, we do this through our parish nurse. Kathy Nelham has graciously given of her time and skills to ensure that you know how to navigate the complexities of a broken health care system.

The other way that 31:9 speaks of working for justice is to speak up. I know that there are those of you who have given your voice to the cause of defending the unborn. These people have no voice and are unable to protect themselves and are humans made in God's image and deserve protection from unjust laws that permit their lives to be taken. There are other ways to speak up for those who have no voice. If someone's English is not their first language, speaking up for those who need a voice can include helping someone who has difficulty because of an English dominated society. Teaching English as a foreign language classes is a great way to speak up for those who don't have a voice by giving them a voice. Or you can actively be engaged in the process of challenging unjust laws or systems through protest, advocacy, or political involvement. I know and have talked with several people from the church who are actively working to deal with injustices in our justice system and I am thankful for each of you.

Why do we do these things? Because we believe that this enables the world to...

See the Wisdom of Christ

In Luke 4:16-21, Jesus comes out of the wilderness, having been victorious over the devil's temptations, enters the synagogue, and reads the Scripture for the day. He reads from Isaiah 61 (read passage). Not only did Jesus read this passage, but he lived it. He came to show the grace and mercy of God to those who didn't deserve it. God's grace doesn't go to the deserving but the undeserving who confess they need his grace. And God's justice doesn't go to those who deserve justice, but it is to be lived out by dealing honestly, fairly, and with integrity. Jesus knew that the just society that we need does not come from a political speech but from valuing the good life.

The reason we as Christians hold to the values we do is due to the reality that we believe that human flourishing comes from God's ways. Christians have a view of the good life that comes from valuing life, equity, righteousness, and justice. We believe that a just society comes from knowing God and knowing his ways.

So do you want a more just society? The ways for us to encourage justice will only increase in a world where sin abounds. A just society will begin with the church – for as we display that God

fights for those who cannot fight for themselves, we will become the people who promote the truest, most free society of all – which will be displayed in the coming kingdom of Christ.