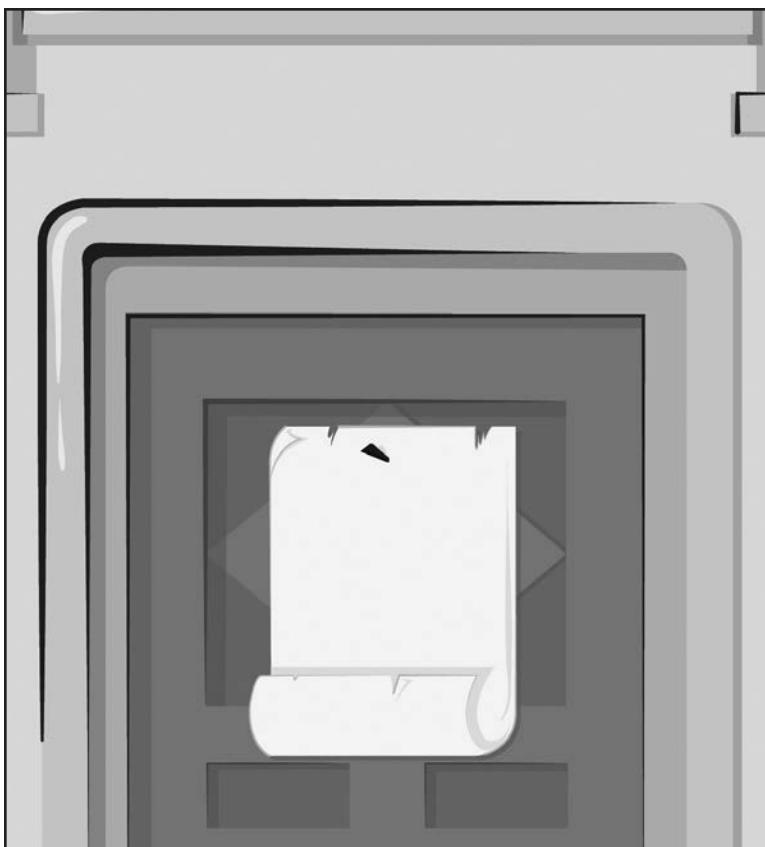


lesson five

JULY 27–AUGUST 2

The Cry of the **Prophets**

“He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Mic. 6:8, NKJV).



Martin Luther nailed his statement of grievances with the church on the door of the Wittenburg church. Luther, as many others throughout history, was willing to go against strong opposition to deliver the biblical message of God.

Isa. 58:2-7

Introduction

Misplaced Zeal

It's pretty easy to make the argument that our spiritual well-being stems from our relationship with God. After all, if God is the source of our salvation, shouldn't seeking after Him, in heart and deed, be our primary concern?

If you're following this thought, you might understand how confused the Israelites would have been by Isaiah's condemnation of their efforts to draw nearer to God. In short order, he condemned their seeking after God (Isa. 58:2), their delight in knowing His ways (verse 2), their fasting (verse 3), and the afflicting of their souls (verse 3). Weren't they doing everything possible to draw nearer to God? How could that possibly be abhorrent to Him?

While they had been making haste to draw near to God, they had been neglecting the needs of the poor and helpless.

As it turns out, the answer is that while they had been making haste to draw near to God, they had been neglecting the needs of the poor and helpless (verses 6, 7). While they may have considered this to be irrelevant to their spiritual condition, God saw things very differently.

For instance, in Amos 5:12 and Isaiah 59:12, God declares injustice toward others to be "transgression" and "sin" in His eyes. Furthermore, in Ezekiel 16, He lists an unwillingness to "strengthen the hand of the poor and needy" (verse 49) as one of the great sins of Sodom (cf. Genesis 19).

But why such a focus on our relationships with others? Aren't such emphases ultimately secondary to our spiritual relationship with God? If our primary spiritual "task" is to love God with all our heart, soul, and might (Deut. 6:5), why should we concern ourselves with the temporal needs of others?

Herein lies the great caveat: God's character, the source of all His thoughts and actions, is centered on a selfless love for others (cf. 1 John 4:8, 10)—a love that all those who seek to follow Him are called to emulate (cf. Phil. 2:5-8) by loving their neighbor (whether they be white, black, gay, straight, homeless, immigrant, disabled, or addicted) as themselves (Lev. 19:18).

There could be, therefore, no clearer illustration of spiritual hypocrisy than the Christian who claims to follow God with all his heart, soul, and strength but who simultaneously neglects to love his neighbor as himself, instead selfishly turning his back on the needs of those around him.

Thus, we recognize that God's grievance with Israel was not over their religious zeal but over their hypocrisy. He saw a people who claimed to love God with all their hearts while their actions demonstrated that His love was all but absent from their hearts. As you study this week, I invite you to explore the depths of your own heart for hypocrisy and surrender it to the only One who can cleanse from every defilement.

Logos *Do Justice*

1 Sam. 8:5, 10–18;
 Isa. 1:15–23; 3:13–15; 5:7; 9:6, 7;
 11:1–5; 42:1–7; 53:4–6; 59:14, 20;
 Ezek. 16:49; 34:2–4, 7–16;
 47:13–48:29;
 Amos 1:3–2:5; 3:9–11; 4:1, 2;
 5:10–15, 24; 7:14, 15; 8:4–6;
 9:11–15;
 Mic. 2:8–11; 3:8–12; 6:8; 7:18–20

Amos 1:3–2:5; 3:9–11; 7:14, 15; 9:11–15

The message of justice permeates the writings of the Hebrew prophets. Though Amos was merely a shepherd, not trained as a prophet nor a son of a prophet (Amos 7:14), he was compelled to communicate the Word of the Lord. “The lion has roared; who will not fear? The Lord God has spoken; who can but prophesy?” (Amos 3:8, ESV). The message he gives is one of judgment against the nations: delivering to the people of each nation an account of their sins and the judgment that they will face because of them. The repeated formula “for three sins . . . , even for four” (Amos 1:3–2:5, NIV) indicates that the sins of the nations had reached their full measure and were overflowing. Here we see God, as judge of all nations, justly executing a fair judgment. The sins listed include slavery, taking advantage of the poor, oppressing the vulnerable, and other sins against humanity.

These prophets recognize that the problem of injustice . . . is too severe to be solved merely through education or social reform.

God judges because God loves—He cannot keep silent in the face of injustice, nor can His people. Here, though, we find Judah and Israel included in the list of nations that will face God’s judgment. The law of God entrusted to them should have made them a light to the other nations; rather, we find that Israel has the longest list of sins of any nation. When the people of Israel turned away from God’s law, they not only sinned against God but also violated the most vulnerable people living among them.

Interspersed in Amos’s message of judgment are no words of hope. The people of Israel are told that they will go into captivity (Amos 7:11). Rather than respond in repentance, they proudly resist the Lord’s message through Amos, only further ensuring their demise (Amos 9:10). But the God who judges remains faithful to His covenant, even when Israel has broken it. Amos ends by anticipating a day when God shall bring His people out of captivity (verses 14, 15). Their sins will be met with judgment, but ultimately the judgment will serve to restore God’s people unto Himself.

Micah 3:8–12; 6:6–8

Micah, like Amos, has a word of judgment for all the world (Mic. 1:2) that focuses, in particular, on the people of Israel (verse 5). God identifies that His people “have risen up as an enemy” for the way they mistreat strangers, women, and children (Mic. 2:8, 9). All of the leaders are corrupt. Even the

priests and prophets, who should serve to direct the people back to the way of God, have compromised their message for the sake of material prosperity (Mic. 3:9–12). They find false comfort in God’s temple presence, saying, “Is not the LORD in the midst of us? No disaster shall come upon us” (verse 11, ESV).

Micah exposes their sin, leading them to ask how they might right themselves before God: “Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? . . . Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” (Mic. 6:6, 7, ESV). Their response indicates that they have become captive to the thinking of the surrounding nations, believing that the gods were to be appeased by multiplying sacrifices. But the Lord requires something else: “To do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (verse 8, ESV). God desires an entire reorientation of the individual.

Sin corrupts the way we relate to others, to ourselves, and to God, with pride taking the place of love. Micah reminds us that God seeks to restore proper relationships with others (do justice), ourselves (love kindness), and Himself (walk humbly). Ultimately, God is calling us to live as divine image bearers, as God Himself is One who does justice, loves kindness, and desires to walk humbly with His people—even to the point of the Eternal One condescending to be born in Bethlehem (Mic. 5:2). It is through His ultimate sacrifice that we can truly come into right relationship with God and humanity.

Ezekiel 34:2–4 and Isaiah 1:15–23

The theme of justice that we have found throughout the messages of Amos and Micah also permeates the messages of the other Hebrew prophets. Ezekiel rebukes the people of Sodom for failing to aid the poor and needy while they enjoyed prosperity (Ezek. 16:49). Israel, too, stood condemned: “The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them” (Ezek. 34:4, ESV).

Isaiah joins the appeal for God’s people to “learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow’s cause” (Isa. 1:17, ESV). Ultimately, these prophets recognize that the problem of injustice (Isa. 59:14) is too severe to be solved merely through education or social reform—though these play important roles. Rather, Isaiah recognizes that the ultimate solution to humanity’s inclination to oppress and abuse is One who will Himself enter into and experience oppression and abuse to be “pierced for our transgressions” (Isa. 53:4–6, ESV) to bring peace—both with God and with one another.

REACT

1. Identify the sins of the nations listed in Amos 1–2. What sins might God list if He were to announce judgment on His people today?
2. What does it mean “to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Mic. 6:8, ESV)? Write a brief description for each of these.
3. Where else do you find the call to do justice in the writings of the other Hebrew prophets?

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Testimony *God's Mission: Heaven in Our Hearts*

John 15:12

In reference to Isaiah 58:6, 7 and our part in helping those in need, Ellen White writes, "Here is set forth the very spirit and character of the work of Christ. His whole life was a sacrifice of Himself for the saving of the world. Whether fasting in the wilderness of temptation or eating with the publicans at Matthew's feast, He was giving His life for the redemption of the lost. Not in idle mourning, in mere bodily humiliation and multitudinous sacrifices, is the true spirit of devotion manifested, but it is shown in the surrender of self in willing service to God and man."¹

**"His whole life was a sacrifice of Himself
for the saving of the world."**

"In God's great plan for the redemption of a lost race, He has placed Himself under the necessity of using human agencies as His helping hand. He must have a helping hand, in order to reach humanity. He must have the cooperation of those who will be active, quick to see opportunities, quick to discern what must be done for their fellow men."²

"When the cases of all come in review before God, the question, What did they profess? is never asked, but, What have they done? Have they been doers of the word? Have they lived for themselves? or have they been exercised in works of benevolence, in deeds of kindness, in love, preferring others before themselves, and denying themselves that they might bless others? If the record shows that this has been their life, that their characters have been marked with tenderness, self-denial, and benevolence, they will receive the blessed assurance and benediction from Christ, 'Well done.'³

"'Love one another, as I have loved you' (John 15:12); when we love the world as He has loved it, then for us His mission is accomplished. We are fitted for heaven; for we have heaven in our hearts."⁴

REACT

1. How can we experience a shift from serving others because we believe it is expected of us to where we want to be a blessing to those in need?

2. What can you do this week either to begin or to continue growing your experience blessing others through service?

1. Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 278.

2. Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, bk. 1, p. 99.

3. Ellen G. White, "The Sin of Selfishness," *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, July 13, 1886.

4. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 641.

Evidence *A Vengeful God*

Most people don't like the idea of a vengeful God. Fear of a recklessly angry god is the stuff that made sailors of old tremble and shake with the possibility of being destroyed on the open waves of the ocean. Some, to this day, have images of a powerful old man with lightning bolts ready to go in case those he is interested in decide to go against his decrees. Psalm 103:8 describes a gentle, merciful God, and His love is certainly for and to everyone. This is especially true for those who have been dispossessed of their homes, have received injustice, or have no other support.

God's people ought to seek out the hurting, not wait for the hurting to find them.

On the other hand, in Psalm 94, the psalmist echoes the concerns that many express at news of the numerous atrocities done to the weak: "Where is He?" "When will He show up?" "Why is He so silent?" We might be tempted to cry out in frustration with the scoffers, "The LORD does not see; the God of Jacob takes no notice" (Ps. 94:7, NIV). But God does see.

This world is full of hurting people who are hurting people. God's grace is for everyone. Ultimately, God has given His church to bring justice to those who are oppressed. "And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds" (Heb. 10:24, 25, NIV).

Those experiencing incredible pain and need are often closer than you think. I recently had the opportunity to lead a group of students to reach out to Syrian refugees in central California. The students were shocked at how close the refugees lived to their school and homes! God's people ought to seek out the hurting, not wait for the hurting to find them (Luke 15:3-7). Many of us aren't opposed to this idea, but we lack the knowledge of how to find or recognize them. While we have a special calling, message, and identity that should not be compromised, we can still befriend those of other faiths. Look for imams, Buddhist priests, and pastors and ask whether they have members who are in need of tangible love through action. Then share our Adventist message of love with the entire community through your service.

REACT

1. What does God's law have to do with justice for orphans and widows (cf. Psalm 94:12)?
2. How could the church seek justice for the oppressed and yet continue to uphold the separation of church and state?

How-to *The Great Physician's Approach*

Deut. 15:11

We have been learning that it is our God-given responsibility to help others. In fact, to neglect those we are privileged to reach is considered sinful in the eyes of God. You might recall the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31). God's people, represented by the rich man, ignored their role as ministers to the needy represented by the character Lazarus. In the parable, as a result of his negligence and after both characters died, the rich man found himself to be lost, while Lazarus was saved.

Who would want to be treated by a doctor who prescribes via guesswork?

Helping others in need may not come as an easy task. When we think about Jesus' ministry, helping others seemed to come easily for Him. He selflessly served anyone who could benefit. We call Him the Great Physician—a title worth keeping in mind as we ponder practical ways to reach those in need. As the greatest Physician of all time, Jesus Christ did the following:

Served out of love. It is easy for us to obey God out of fear of either missing out on salvation or displeasing Him. But that certainly is not God's intention in sharing the parable or reminding us to help others. Paul tells us that love should motivate all that we do (1 Cor. 13:1–3). We need to first ask God, the source of love, for a heart to love others (Rom. 5:5). Possessing a love for souls not only makes our service acceptable but makes it much easier too.

Diagnosed the problem. Any wise and professional doctor will assess the patient's problem carefully before giving the appropriate diagnosis. Who would want to be treated by a doctor who prescribes via guesswork? Nobody. Therefore, it is important to make use of our ears and listen to others when they speak so that we can become aware of their needs (Prov. 18:13).

Prayed for wisdom and power. Jesus exemplified the importance of prayer before service (Mark 1:32–35). Each day, before reaching out to the multitudes of needy people, He prayed for divine wisdom and power, and we should pray for that too (Acts 1:8; 2:1–4; James 1:5).

Obeded. After praying, it would be good to listen to God's instructions for service and to obey. When we adhere to the voice of truth, the Holy Spirit can work through us powerfully for the good of those in need (Acts 5:32).

REACT

1. Who is the Lazarus in your life?
2. What steps would you add in the four practical steps listed above?
3. What motivates you to help the needy?

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Isa. 42:1-7;
53:4-6;
Phil. 2:13

Opinion *It's Time to Act!*

What would a prophet of God warn us about today? What can replace our allegiance to God in 2019? How are the poor and helpless oppressed in these “enlightened” and “scientific” times? Ask the impoverished: they know that oppression still happens today. Even though we are educated through secular programming to live moral lives and work for the common good, greed and corruption still infect every level of business, politics, and even—gasp!—religion.

He can use you today to relieve the downtrodden.

Knowing what is right and what is wrong is not enough. The fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil is not sufficient for an abundant life. As digital natives, we are used to being bombarded by information; we are given but a couple of seconds to dwell on some righteous thought before the next bright and exciting topic flashes on our screen. That overload of emotional responses without action programs us into apathy. Perhaps if a prophet spoke up today, no one would respond amid the clamor of billions of other voices.

The Bible texts in this week’s lesson call for action. Micah 6:8 calls us to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God. To fulfill that call requires more than social meetings and feel-good rallies; we must be a catalyst for change in the workplace and in our homes. Our church has a long history of social activism, birthed from our value of all life being created and redeemed by God, our emphasis on wholistic and not just religious health, and our urgency from living at the end of this world’s history. How can we continue that legacy?

As with every dilemma, the solution the Bible gives to overcoming inaction and injustice is Jesus. Throughout his book, Isaiah gives credit to the Messiah for rescuing the oppressed. Jesus breaks the slavery of sin at the cross, He atones all injustice with judgment, and He can use you today to relieve the downtrodden. He can get you off your bed and out of your dorm room or apartment to make those friendships. Just ask Him, and He will make it happen. Do not put Jesus on a to-do list. Act now.

REACT

1. What small but significant changes should be made right now in your prayer life and social activities to better reflect the compassion of Jesus?
2. What ongoing outreach could you start in your Sabbath School group?

Exploration

Engaged or Indifferent?

| Isa. 42:1-7

CONCLUDE

True religion is following after the heart of God. As a prophet of God, Isaiah's message was all about calling God's people to live a life that reflected the character of the One they claimed to obey. Amos, Ezekiel, Micah, and other prophets also shared a similar perspective on the compassionate nature of God, pointing out our responsibility to respond to the needs of those around us. The biblical narrative in both the Old and New Testaments brings our attention back, again and again, to the necessity of caring for society's most vulnerable and defining passivity or indifference to their suffering as sin against God. Ultimately, as the passage in Isaiah 42 expresses clearly, relieving suffering is the very work of Christ and the work that He was commissioned to do while He was on earth. The question then remains: what are we willing to do in response to His example?

CONSIDER

- Listening to the song "Beauty for Brokenness (God of the Poor)," by Graham Kendrick, in which the writer prays for the compassion and justice of God to become a personal reality in his own life.
- Volunteering for a local community welfare event such as a canned food drive or soup kitchen.
- Sponsoring a vulnerable child through an organization such as Child Impact (<https://childimpact.org>) or International Children's Care (<http://www.forhiskids.org>).
- Watching the short film "Depraved Indifference" by Eric Ludy on YouTube.
- Taking part in a two-dollar challenge (<http://twodollarchallenge.org>) to discover what it's like to live on two US dollars or less per day and raise donations for an organization of your choice at the same time.
- Writing about your own needs and difficulties. How has the church demonstrated Christ to you? How has it failed? In what ways can you learn from your experiences to help you offer compassion to others who are in need?

CONNECT

Proverbs 14:31; Matthew 25:31-46; James 1:19-26.

Ellen G. White, *A Call to Stand Apart*, chap. 15, "Social Justice"; *The Ministry of Healing*, pp. 140-145.

Sikhu Daco, "Social Justice: A Systematic Case for Adventist Engagement in Christian Benevolence," Pondering... (blog), <http://www.sikhu.org/social-justice/>.

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