

Living the
Gospel

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:8–10, NKJV).



By reading the Bible, we learn how to immerse ourselves in the gospel and then enact it in our lives. As followers of Christ, it is our duty to share with others the good news of salvation and relieve them of their burdens.

Introduction

The Deeper Mantra

Mal. 2:10;
1 Cor. 12:13;
Phil. 2:1-8

Social justice. When you hear that term, what do you think about? How do those two words make you feel? Are you compelled to act, or are you enraged by the inaction of others, whether they are in your classes or on your campus, whether they sit in your pew or preach from a pulpit? When you see injustice played out in your mirror, what then? What happens next?

We are so caught up in the blame game that we neglect our responsibilities.

Our generation is not alone in its selfishness, in its inability to advocate for those in our communities who need to know that they, though poor, needy, lame, naked, or imprisoned, belong to the body of Christ, that salvation is a gift offered to them freely. We are so caught up in the blame game that we neglect our responsibilities. Yes, the church is a collective; however, we are not saved as the church, an entity. Meaning, just because the local congregation I belong to is not active or is indifferent to the needs of the community doesn't mean I have that same luxury.

Israel Houghton's song "Deeper" speaks to what our heart's posture should be as we consider social justice: "Close enough to feel the cadence of Your heart for justice, Lord / Streams of justice flow to the least of these."¹ Whenever I hear the rest of the words of this song, I am compelled to reflect on every person I didn't deem worthy of my assistance.

In a society seemingly committed to diversity, we are struggling to follow Paul's instructions to fulfill his joy by being "likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory;" he continues, "but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves" (Phil. 2:2, 3). We are increasingly selfish and unaware of the fact that we are all brothers and sisters and that we should fight for the needs of those less fortunate than ourselves. In light of social justice, we fail when we don't consider others as strongly as we consider ourselves. We fail when we don't seek God's heart for His people.

As you study this week, let this be your prayer: "God give us a heart for the least of these."

1. Israel Houghton, "Deeper," *A Deeper Level*, Integrity Music B000UCH5LU, 2007.

Isa. 58:1–12

Evidence *Service: The Nearness of God*

After the Israelites returned from Babylonian exile in 539 B.C., they became passionate about what the Christian Standard Bible translates as “the nearness of God” (Isa. 58:2). Isaiah writes of how the Israelites devoted themselves to praying, fasting, and sacrificing burnt offerings as a means of acquiring God’s presence and His favor. But for some reason, these acts of worship weren’t bringing the Israelites any closer to God. Rather, they seemed to be pushing Him away.

The Israelites were worshiping God while oppressing people.

Isaiah 58 is a record of God telling the Israelites why their attempts to draw near to Him weren’t working. The Israelites were worshiping God while oppressing people (verses 3, 4). They were taking advantage of their servants and the poor.

Isaiah 58 challenges the Israelites to understand that drawing near to God is not just about sacrifices and fasting. God says, If you want to draw near to Me, then “break the chains of wickedness, . . . set the oppressed free. . . . Share your bread with the hungry, . . . bring the poor and homeless into your house, . . . clothe the naked when you see him, and [do not] ignore your own flesh and blood” (verses 6, 7, CSB). God says that when we put the needs of others before our own, we put ourselves in a position to receive His presence and His favor.

If prayer, fasting, singing, and other acts of worship are the only way we come to God but we still practice hate, discrimination, selfishness, and mean-spiritedness, then God too will look to us and say, “You cannot fast as you do today, hoping to make your voice heard on high” (verse 4, CSB). Our praise will reach Heaven sounding like a “noisy gong or a clanging cymbal” (1 Cor. 13:1, CSB) because we have not love. When we draw near to those in need and show the love of Jesus Christ through service, then we are granted access to draw near to God. It is then that we are given His presence and His favor: “At that time, when you call, the LORD will answer; when you cry out, He will say, “Here I am”” (Isa. 58:9,CSB).

REACT

1. This week, what are some practical ways you can draw near to God and show the nearness of God through service?
2. Has your church restricted worship to a church service on Sabbath morning? How can you “cry out loudly” and encourage them to draw near to God and show the nearness of God through service?

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The Right Service

Nobody likes doing something the wrong way. No one enjoys building something backward, driving to the wrong destination, or purchasing the wrong product. We are inclined to do a task and do it right. When we find ourselves failing to achieve what we set out to do, we often go through a vast array of emotions: anger, being distraught, embarrassment, and a host of other things. It can be demoralizing when we have a goal in mind, but in our attempt to attain that goal, we find out we have been going about it the wrong way. It's one thing to fall short in our individual aspirations, but it is another thing when we go about our spiritual practice wrong; when we get it wrong, it can have a grave impact on those around us.

Going through the motions is not sufficient for God.

Serving Those in Need (Isaiah 58)

In Isaiah 58 God speaks through the prophet Isaiah and tells the Israelites that they have been fasting wrong. This message challenges the very core of the community. The Israelites fast because of their supposed relationship with the Creator. They posited that when they abstained from food for an extended period and committed to God, they would be seen and noticed (Isa. 58:3). They know the right posture for the fast: bowing of the head, spreading out sackcloth and ashes. But God says this is not what He wants. Going through the motions is not sufficient for God.

God tells them that they have a greater responsibility, that the fast that He is calling them to is one of justice for the world and relief to the heavy laden. He tells them that they ought to “loosen the bonds of wickedness, to undo the bands of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free” (verse 6, NASB). In the next verse, God tells them to share their bread with the hungry, bring the poor and homeless in their house, and clothe those who are naked. Those in society who can help others less fortunate should extend their resources. God says this is the fast He requires. And God reminds the Israelites that in helping others, they help themselves. When we serve those in need, when we finally get it right, healing comes forth, and not just healing but also righteousness will be in front of us, and God's glory will be behind us (verse 8).

Serving Despite Our Differences (Acts 10)

Peter, too, thinks he is living his life the right way. Peter is a devout Jew who has accepted the teachings of the God-Man, Jesus of Nazareth. Peter spent years as a disciple of Jesus, saw Jesus taken away to be executed, saw the risen Lord, and received the Holy Spirit. Peter is committed to following Jesus. While Peter's motivation is right, his methodology is wrong. Peter is still influenced and affected by his culture and upbringing. Peter struggles to accept those who are not Jewish (Acts 10; Gal. 2:11–14). Peter is attempting to live right, but he gets it wrong.

Peter falls into a trance and sees a strange vision. He sees all kinds of four-footed animals and is told to kill and eat. Peter, being a good Jew, opposes the message because the animals are unholy and unclean. But Peter hears a voice that says, "What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy" (Acts 10:15, NASB). The message is finally made clear when Cornelius's men arrive at his house. Cornelius is a Gentile, deemed unholy by Jewish culture. But Cornelius is in need of the service Peter can provide. Peter must put aside his prejudices and presuppositions and do the right thing that God is asking of him.

Serving in the Harvest (Matt. 9:37)

In Matthew 9:37 Jesus laments to the disciples that the harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few. We tend to view this text as a call for more workers, and while that aspect is true, this text is also highlighting the vastness of people in need. The harvest has plenty of broken families, oppressed individuals, unfair systems and policies, and communities lacking adequate food, clothes, and resources. If we are to be laborers for Christ, we must prepare to face this harvest ahead of us.

REACT

1. What, if anything, does the church do wrong even though it has the right motivation? How can that be corrected?
2. How can we overcome cultural assumptions about individuals who are different (ethnically, financially, etc.) from us?
3. Why are the laborers few for the harvest, if people love God?

Testimony

A Recipe for Success

Isa. 58:6, 7

“Read this chapter carefully [Isaiah 58], and understand the kind of ministry that will bring life into the churches. The work of the gospel is to be carried by means of our liberality as well as by our labors. When you meet suffering souls who need help, give it to them. When you find those who are hungry, feed them. In doing this you will be working in lines of Christ’s ministry.”¹

“It is impossible for you to fasten upon the arm of God with one hand while the other is employed in ministering to your own pleasure.”

“Many wonder why their prayers are so lifeless, their faith so feeble and wavering, their Christian experience so dark and uncertain. ‘Have we not fasted,’ they say, ‘and walked mournfully before the Lord of hosts?’ In the fifty-eighth chapter of Isaiah Christ has shown how this condition of things may be changed. He says: ‘Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke? Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh?’ Verses 6, 7. This is the recipe that Christ has prescribed for the faint-hearted, doubting, trembling soul. Let the sorrowful ones, who walk mournfully before the Lord, arise and help someone who needs help.”²

“The fast which God can accept is described. It is to deal thy bread to the hungry and to bring the poor which are cast out to thy house. Wait not for them to come to you. The labor rests not on them to hunt you up and entreat of you a home for themselves. You are to search for them and bring them to your house. You are to draw out your soul after them. You are with one hand to reach up and by faith take hold of the mighty arm which brings salvation, while with the other hand of love you reach the oppressed and relieve them. It is impossible for you to fasten upon the arm of God with one hand while the other is employed in ministering to your own pleasure.”³

REACT

1. How should church members respond to the homeless or beggars?
2. Why would serving others be called a fast?

1. Ellen G. White, Manuscript 7, 1908.

2. Ellen G. White, *A Call to Medical Evangelism and Health Education*, p. 25.

3. Ellen G. White, *Welfare Ministry*, p. 30.

Ps. 82:3;
Prov. 31:9

How-to *See. Say. Do!*

It is a misconception to think that we are above getting involved in social activism. This couldn't be further from the truth. The Bible is riddled with passages about our duty to our surrounding communities. For example, did you know that the Bible speaks to the issue of poverty in Proverbs 29:7? Those who claim to be righteous through the blood of Jesus should bring relief to all who are afflicted, weak, fatherless, and destitute (Ps. 82:3). Sounds nice, but how does one help those who can't help themselves?

See the issues, say something, and then organize and do something.

The first thing to do is see the issues around you. We are naturally self-ish, so seeing an issue that affects someone other than us may be difficult. Always take notes on what can be done to bring relief to the community around your house or church. If you can't see, then ask your local city hall community organizers what you can do to help the city.

The second thing you do after identifying a need is "say something." Start the conversation and bring awareness to the issue. Some may not even know that there is a need in their own backyard. Bringing awareness to issues in our society brings people that much closer to wanting to help solve those issues. Many of us see an article or post on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or Snapchat, and our hearts break. We talk about it with our immediate circle of friends, and then we do nothing.

In America, Homeland Security and many police departments have the slogan "See something, say something." While it may be enough for those entities, it is not enough for us. Saying something shouldn't be the extent of your contribution to solving the problem. The next step is to organize and bring relief to those who need it. We must do something now. You don't have to go far to be of service. Missions are one way of addressing a need, but you can also pour yourself into your surrounding community. We can't reach people for Christ unless they know we care. So, see the issues, say something, and then organize and do something.

See. Say. Do!

REACT

1. What are the needs of the community you or your church belongs to?
2. What organizations are bringing awareness to the issues?
3. How can you help solve the issues in your community?

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Opinion

An Inescapable Responsibility

Prov. 31:8, 9;
Jer. 22:3;
Luke 4:18, 19

The first phrase of Proverbs 31:8 reads, “Open your mouth” in the English Standard Version. The New International Version renders it “Speak up,” and it is “Open thy mouth” in the King James Version.

Scripture is perfectly clear about our individual obligation.

The term *social justice* evokes emotions that illuminate two easily conflated realities. First, the term has become politicized, frequently used as a surrogate for policies that benefit racial minorities, LGBTQ+ individuals, women, immigrants, and other marginalized groups. Second, policies that benefit these individuals are generally associated with one particular political party. Together, these twisting realities generate an atmosphere of politically driven hostility toward those who advocate on behalf of these individuals. Many first-world Christians struggle to accept policies that have a social justice flavor.

However, while some Christians would prefer to live out these verses through their political participation, Scripture is perfectly clear about our individual obligation. Open thy mouth. Speak up. This biblical principle is repeated ad nauseam throughout both testaments. As written in Proverbs, this is a two-step process:

First, we must identify who are our mute, our poor, and our needy. This is no easy task. Serious and difficult questions surround merely the scope of this prong. Should we pick out the poor in the world? In our hemisphere? Country? State? County? City? Neighborhood? Block? While the Adventist denomination often has a global institutional emphasis, it may be easier for the individual to maintain a localized focus.

Once we choose a geographic space, we must decide who, within that space, qualifies as the mute, the poor, and the needy. The poor and needy are somewhat self-explanatory, but what about the mute? Sure, this could literally mean “those who cannot speak,” but this may also mean “those who cannot stand up for themselves.” Who these people may be will vary greatly from community to community. However, powerlessness is as universal as sin. Those with the ability to speak must speak. Open thy mouth.

REACT

1. How should one determine who qualifies as the mute, the poor, and the needy?
2. What role does the local church have, as a collective body of voices, in advocating for social justice causes?

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Prov. 29:7

Exploration

Consider Their Cause

CONCLUDE

There is a basic nature to the righteous, and a portion of that is how we respond to the cause of the oppressed. This is not something you do to gain favor with God; it is evidence that the Spirit of the Most High God dwells within you. And here we find that a marker of the wicked is their inability to empathize with those whom God empathizes with. And is not the God of the Bible the God of the oppressed? We would do well to consider our positions on the issues that will define our times.

CONSIDER

- Educating yourself. Find documentaries, books, and news articles that challenge your perspectives on hot-button topics such as illegal immigration, overseas conflicts, the global refugee crisis, LBGTQ+ issues, global warming, mass incarceration, and other social justice issues.
- Connecting with needy communities. Immerse yourself in communities that are facing obstacles and oppression and listen to their stories. And after listening to them, ask questions from a place of humility and empathy with a desire to find common ground.
- Getting involved. Ask how you can be of service in communities that have needs and enter the fight as just that, a servant. Remember that they are the experts, and your duty is to use your privileges to assist their cause, not to define their cause for them.
- Challenging others to engage the needs around them. When you come across people in your community, challenge them with your newfound experiences and hold them accountable for their words and actions.
- Defending the weak. If you are out in the streets or online and see someone from an oppressed community being accosted, stand in the gap and defend them. That could look like speaking on their behalf, contacting a manager or a police officer, or escorting that person to safety and waiting with them until the situation has de-escalated.
- Committing yourself to a cause. Find a cause(s) or community that you are passionate about and become a lifelong advocate.
- Remembering why you are involved. Remember that this is true religion.

CONNECT

Deuteronomy 10:18; 27:19; Proverbs 14:31; 28:27; Micah 6:8; Luke 10:30–37.

Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 2, pp. 25, 26; *The Desire of Ages*, p. 640.

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