

**Series:** One Nation under God  
**Title:** Human Rights and Poverty  
**Text:** *"He who gives to the poor will lack nothing, but he who closes his eyes to them receives many curses."* Proverbs 28:27  
**Key Word:** Responses  
**Proposition:** Christ-followers can and must address human rights and poverty with these responses.

Over the past several years I have learned that people respond to positive messages and are turned off by negative ones. This is what makes hearing the Old Testament Prophets so challenging. Talk about negative! Clearly, by today's standards, the prophets would not be popular like some preachers we see on television. I am sure that they would not get elected for a high office because they failed to say what the crowds wanted to hear. These guys rant and rave. They disturb and agitate. This is true especially for what scholars call the Minor Prophets. Have you ever listened to Amos?

Amos proclaimed, *"I despise your festivals and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies ... Take away from me the noise of your songs ... and let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream!"* (Amos 5:21-24)

The prophet Micah reminds God's people, *"He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God"* (Micah 6:8, NRS).

**God cares about social justice and human rights.** God through the Prophets lays it on the line, even at the risk of offending people. Yes, these messengers from God were not entrepreneurs in the free market of ideas, competing with others trying

to persuade individuals to choose their products. But, they were God's voice. And that was enough. When someone chooses to ignore God, they have a problem.

The prophet Malachi also speaks in God's behalf, speaking against human injustice which comes in the form of poverty and human rights violations. He says that sin is not only related to one's personal and private behavior—what you do behind closed doors—but also to what you do out in front of everybody else.

The Lord says: *"Then I will draw near to you for judgment; I will be swift to bear witness not only against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me,"* Malachi 3:5

God's people are oppressing hired workers, forcing them to live below the poverty line or to survive on minimum wage. They are forgetting widows and orphans, the people in ancient society who end up destitute because family is the only social security system there is. The poor are falling through the cracks. God's people are rejecting the aliens, the non-Jews—looking down on those with green cards, avoiding those who can't speak Hebrew or do so with a thick accent, making fun of those who have weird, unpronounceable names or who look different.

Do you know what Malachi is saying to God's people? He is saying: We don't have the luxury of ignoring the needy, of being stewards of "just-us." No, we're called to be stewards of justice. It's our responsibility to remember the poor and the powerless. It's our responsibility to care for the little, the least, the last and the lost.

The prophet confronts God's people head on, knowing that the temptation is always great for God's people to put themselves first, to be led by their wants and their needs and their desires. So what if everybody else goes to hell in a hand basket? Are they not responsible for their own lives? We're not our brother's keeper. Truth be told, that temptation is probably greatest for God's people in times of abundance.

When biblical archaeologists dig down into the ruins of ancient Israel, they find there are periods when the houses are more or less the same size, and the artifacts of life they unearth show there is a relative equality among the people. During those periods, interestingly enough, the Hebrew Prophets are quite silent. They have very little to say. But the archaeologists' diggings also uncover remnants of huge houses and tiny little hovels. These and other objects show a period of great economic disparity among the people. Not surprisingly, it's during these times that the Prophets are most outspoken, denouncing the great gaps in wealth and the neglect of the poor. *"He who gives to the poor will lack nothing, but he who closes his eyes to them receives many curses."*

Wealth is not bad. Anybody who tells you that doesn't know the Bible. But as Jim Wallis notes, "the Bible doesn't mind prosperity; it just insists that it be shared."

The prophets are saying to God's people: Look, you have a choice. You can be stewards of *just us* or you can be stewards of *justice*.

In a world with ever-widening gaps, where it seems that the rich only get richer and the poor only get poorer, we face the same choice today. Just-us or justice?

In a world where Michael Jordan made more from Nike in one year than all the hired Nike workers in all the Asian factories that make Nike shoes: Just us or justice? In a world where the CEO of Disney makes \$97,000 per hour and his hired workers in Haiti make \$.28 an hour: Just us or justice? In a world where an out of state casino owner and CEO's make off with their golden parachutes and thousands lose their jobs: Just-us or justice?

It's so easy to point the finger at everybody else, but there's a huge gap between my 1,500 square-foot home and our friends who fit their living room, dining room, and bedroom—for six or eight people together—under a single thatched roof, in a hut measuring no more than eight or ten feet across. There's a huge gap between the 16,000 microbrews or 50 flavors of Snapple that are available to quench our thirst, and the three out of five kids in Senegal who won't make it past their fifth birthday because what little water they do have to drink is tainted with animal dung and teaming with bacteria.

The prophet Malachi says: Don't you think for a minute that the Lord doesn't care about such inequities. The bottom line is that a lack of social justice will bring about God's judgment.

In the face of such inequalities, Malachi says the Lord will come to judge God's people. In fact, the New Testament says the Lord did come some 400 years after Malachi—in the person of Jesus Christ.

What Malachi anticipated has happened. The Lord has come in judgment—but also in grace. Certainly the Lord continues to come to us today with words that might make us a little hot under the collar. These prophetic words make us feel a little uncomfortable! But they also want us to believe that God’s judgment does not come to destroy us. Rather, it is like a refiner's fire—purifying, cleansing, and consuming the imperfections. It's getting rid of that which prevents us from being all that we can be for the sake of the kingdom of God. I think of the judgment of the Lord as a kind of severe mercy—like divine chemotherapy or divine radiation, attacking the cancerous cells or the deadly tumor of human sin so that we can truly live.

It's interesting that the image of a refiner's fire is alluded to in the long-lost verse of the hymn "America the Beautiful": "America, America, may God thy gold refine, till all success be nobleness and every gain divine."

So what will it be—just us or justice?

**Christians should participate in social justice.** The prophets are mobilizing all who claim to be God's people, whether citizens of this nation or any other nation, to be stewards of God's justice. This is a large part of the church's mission, isn't it? It seems to me that the church’s mission is justice. **Justice is** the money and the time given by this church and by individual members of this church. **Justice is** not forgetting soup kitchens and overnight shelters. **Justice means** reaching into the river of human despair and rescuing people who are drowning, offering them relief. It might also mean moving upstream to see who or what is throwing them in the river in

the first place—and doing something about it. **Justice means** casting ballots in favor of God's ways and purposes, in support of aliens, widows, orphans, strangers, and the poor among us.

When Henry David Thoreau was thrown in jail for a short time because of his opposition to America's involvement in the Mexican War, one of his friends came to visit him. Looking through the bars, the friend asked Henry, "What are you doing in here?"

Thoreau responded, "I have to ask you: What are you doing out there?"

Not a bad question: What are you doing out there for the sake of justice? So what can we do out there? How can we create a more just society? We can **Read** ourselves full so we are fully informed of the issues.

We can **reflect** on the issues with others. On November 4<sup>th</sup> Ohioans will be faced with the question of just-us or justice. The Casino Gambling issue proposes a constitutional amendment to grant a monopoly for a commercial casino. No other Ohio business would have a legalized monopoly. This casino will be able to obtain a liquor license regardless of local ordinances. This amendment if approved would guarantee its owners 70% of the gross revenues while the state will receive no money from the casino. County governments will receive a modest income. Crime increases when casino gambling is introduced into an area. Gambling preys people who are poor, luring them with the promise of life free from financial worries and burdens. Gambling is bad for children and families with increasing divorce rates,

child neglect, and domestic violence. Friends, families, marriages, the poor will be the real losers if Issue 6 passes. It's not about Ohio jobs. It's about greed. We must vote no on Issue 6. Remember Just-us or Justice.

In addition, Ohioans must vote "yes" on issue 5 which addresses Pay-Day Lending. The multi-billion dollar payday lending industry has initiated a campaign to override the recently enacted payday lending reforms, rather than operate under the new law. The lenders call their campaign "Ohioans for Financial Freedom." This sounds to me like 'Just-us.' It insults our shared value of protecting those in need, and seeking the common good. Three hundred ninety one percent (391%) annual interest on a loan is usury. And, usury is not freedom. It is exploitation. Exploitation of our most vulnerable neighbors – the working poor, the elderly, minorities, immigrants, military personnel and others desperate for cash. Because the loans are so short-term, the borrower does not have time to recover financially before principal and interest are due in full, forcing them to get another expensive loan before their next payday. This is financial bondage, not freedom. Friends what will it be, "Just-us or Justice." It our choice.

Next, **reveal** love through service. Recently, while inching along in traffic, A man saw two men in conversation on the sidewalk. One man was seated on a box at the end of the freeway off-ramp. He was gray-haired and tired looking, and he held a cardboard sign with a message written by an unsteady hand: "Please Help." The other

individual was a Latino man. They shared a brief exchange, and the Latino man walked away.

The driver drove by the spot where the man in need sat on his box. He caught a glimpse of the younger Latino man walking down the street. He recognized him as someone who attended his church. The man pulled over, rolled down the window, and asked if he needed a ride. "No, my car is right there," he said. Confused, He asked what he was doing walking down the street by the freeway. The Latino man said that he stopped to pray with the man and get him some food. The man drove off, moved by his friend's generosity.

He found out later that day that his friend has stopped to help the old man before. One day a choir member saw him take his shirt off—and give it to the man. Needless to say, this Latino Christ-follower lives justice. He not only votes at the ballot box but also at freeway.

So friends what will it be for us...Just-us or Justice. What will it be in the days ahead, what will it be on November 4? What will it be everyday of our lives?