

Chapter 9

The Practice of Justice and Mercy

“I tell you the truth, whatever you did for the least of one of these brothers of mine, you did for me.” (Matthew 25:40)

*‘At the end of the 20th century most of us will have to repent, not of the great evils we have done, but simply great apathy that has prevented us from doing anything.’
(Martin Luther King)¹*

*‘In the city, souls awoken, bodies shaking, oh pull me up let me see the view. And to the hungry in the gutter, we’ve deprived them bread and butter, always not enough.
No not enough.’ (Wall of Love by Simple Minds)²*

My wife had been in and out of hospital since the start of the year and my as yet unborn son looked like he might not survive his birth. As I sat in the waiting room after hearing the latest prognosis about Karen’s health I felt utterly desperate. What was God doing?

As I mentioned in an earlier chapter, the last few months of Karen’s pregnancy with Daniel were a traumatic time. One night I remember leaving the hospital feeling so desperate for God to move that I questioned myself. Was this about me? Had I sinned in some terrible way? Did my love for God not have quite the right integrity about it?

As I walked home, I saw a homeless guy asking for any spare change. Without thinking I emptied my pockets, it must have been nearly £10. Maybe that will release some new healing for Karen. I know I thought that way. Maybe being kind to the poor might release a blessing for me. As I walked further I began to feel convicted. I had assumed that kindness for the poor was some way of bribing God to hear my cries.

‘He has shown you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.’ (Micah 6:8)

It seems that in the last twenty years, many within the Western church have been looking for shortcuts, things that will unlock blessing. The keys to the nation, revival, finding ancient blessings and wells. There have been many times when I have heard this verse quoted as a key to success. If only we will care for the poor, then God will pour out his blessings. What if he simply wants us to obey him, to simply love people?

¹ Martin Luther King, letter from jail in Birmingham Alabama

² ‘Wall of Love’ by Simple Minds, from ‘Street Fighting Years’ (1989 Virgin Records)

Many of us are very impatient with God. We want to arrive at success and quickly. If only there would be revival then everything would be OK. If only we would love the poor then God would move. But could the point actually be heaven, be eternity? What if he simply wants us to obey him until then? I've often wondered what people expect of the idea of revival. We can all put our feet up for a bit then. Maybe we can all put down our bibles and cancel our prayer meetings and go and have an ice cream.

Micah called people to walk humbly with their God. Sometimes our journeys with God aren't about the arrivals, but about the process of the journey itself. When we walk humbly, we lose all our agenda's, all of our status, we stop trying to protect our ministries or enhance our reputations. We aim to put God on the pedestal, not us. Maybe like the pilgrims of old, we should focus on the journey itself.

He calls us to act justly. But we also told us that the poor will always be with us (Mark 14:7). He calls us to love mercy, but we know that we will never love enough or give enough of that until he comes again. Even in 'walking humbly with your God', there is no end point or arrival destination. In eternity we will be walking with him forever more (Revelation 21:3). There will never be enough of being with God.

So if this is a task with no end (at least this side of heaven), what does that mean? Why does Jesus call us to act justly and love mercy in a world where there will never be enough of those to finish the job? Why? Because this is the nature of God, this is the divine dream itself. For the mercy of Christ to flow from the cross and to flood our lands. For the justice of God to roll down like a river (Amos 5:24).

To love the poor is not to gain a spiritual key or arrive at a destination. It can never be a program or a shortcut. It is simply to love as God loves. To act justly and love mercy, instead of being a means to another (more spiritual) end, is to demonstrate the very nature of Jesus Christ. The Christ whose death on the cross brought mercy and justice together in an eternal embrace.

A just and merciful community

A Boiler Room is kind to people by being:

A just and merciful community where the practical needs of the local poor are met and where liberation is championed.

You will have noticed that this is the first Boiler Room practice to contain two values; mercy and justice. To be honest we spent a lot of time wondering which one it should be, and ended up with both.

Our heart was to come up with a practice that expressed the call within Boiler Rooms to express kindness, to the poor, to those in need. We also needed to find a word that expressed the need for

Boiler Room's to be places of campaigning and action; places where the cause of the oppressed or downtrodden was championed.

Just like the Celts, we believe Christ is the champion of the poor. The Celts believed that 'prayer and involvement in human needs were deeply entwined'³.

For Boiler Room's there was a combined passion to feed the homeless and to campaign for trade justice. Mercy and justice summed up these desires.

Mercy is about undeserved grace. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word 'hesed' was often used. 'Hesed' referred to right conduct towards fellow men or loyalty to the Lord or both, in essence what God requires from us, to love each other and Him. Sometimes the word was actually translated as love (for example Hosea 6:4). The dictionary definition of mercy includes 'forbearance towards one who is in one's power; a forgiving disposition; compassion for the unfortunate'.⁴

Mercy in the Old and New Testament's referred either to God's kindness, forgiveness or patience with us and to the need for us to show kindness and grace to others. As we shall see shortly, it was a central challenge to mankind.

Justice is mentioned in a number of contexts. The dictionary refers to it as 'the quality of being just'. The definition of justice in Aramaic law was to not ill-treat the alien, widows and orphans. God declared that 'if they do cry out to me I will certainly hear their cry' (Exodus 22:22-27)

In the Bible it can refer to the law or judgement. It shouldn't be denied (Exodus 23:6) or perverted (Leviticus 19:15). To deliver it requires wisdom (1 Kings 3:28) and discernment (1 Kings 3:11). Justice is a way God acts towards mankind, the cross it's ultimate demonstration (Romans 3:25). Justice is also something demanded of us; 'follow justice and justice alone' (Deuteronomy 16:20). Again it was often used to refer directly to the poor. Again, it is a central challenge to us.

Interestingly, Mercy and Justice are often used together. In God's call through Zechariah, mirroring a similar message in Micah, mercy and justice are non-negotiables is obeying God.

'This is what the Lord Almighty says 'Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor. In your hearts do not think evil of each other' (Zechariah 7:9).

These joint uses are usually when God is challenging the people to respond. Mercy and justice were the righteousness and required ways to express the love of God. In Micah's challenge,

³ Exploring Celtic Christianity – Ray Simpson **check**

⁴ Chambers English Dictionary (1998 edition, WR Chambers)

quoted earlier in this chapter, they link directly to walking with God. Indeed Micah was responding to the Israelites questions as to why God was not responding to their religious activity. Instead, what God wanted was clear; 'to act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God'.

Mercy and Justice also combine explosively at the cross; where Jesus died in our place, yet expressed the love and forgiveness of God. Arguably, only true mercy comes when in tandem with just actions. Arguably only true justice is expressed when done in a merciful way.

Made in His Image

'So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.' Genesis 1:27

Consider that for a moment. The people you sat next to in the train, the people who live next to you, they're made in the image of God. What's more the love and value he has for them is immense. Each one is of value to God (Psalm 139), he died for us (John 3:16), he delights in each of us (Zephaniah 3:17).

One of the challenges of opening a Boiler Room is that you will regularly be visited by the street-sleepers in your area. Perhaps it is the spiritual draw that brings them in or maybe it's the chance of a nice cup of tea and a warm building, I'm not sure. It's a challenge because it makes us feel uncomfortable. It could be a smell, they could be drunk or maybe their social skills might not qualify them for the local yacht-club. If I'm honest I know the feelings I battle when I meet the homeless and to my shame I've sometimes walked away. But often at these times, God reminds me that he has made all men in His image.

This detail in itself means that we must treat each person with respect and give them dignity and value. God does it, so should we. This is the foundation of an idea of mercy and justice in the world. God values individual people. It gives a basis for the UN Declaration of Human Rights and it convicts me when I refuse hospitality to the poor. Jesus declared:

'For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' (Matthew 25: 35,36)

The Character of God

God is merciful and God is just.

God's character oozes mercy. It flows from every part of who he is. He delights to show mercy (Micah 7:8), mercy was and is key in his redemptive acts (Isaiah 63:9). James saw that 'the Lord

is full of compassion and mercy' (James 5:13) while the writer to the Hebrews saw the throne of God as they place where mercy can be received (Hebrews 4:16).

In the life and death of Jesus we see mercy at work. Mercy in the way he relates to people, mercy in the way he treats his ever stumbling disciples, and then mercy in his act of love on the cross. 'But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in our transgressions – it is by grace that you have been saved' (Ephesians 2:4).

Justice also flows from the very centre of God. He 'will govern his people with justice' (Psalm 9:8). God loves justice (Psalm 11:7, Isaiah 61:8). Justice is the 'foundation of your throne' (Psalm 89:14). Isaiah describes justice as God's 'measuring line' (Isaiah 28:17). It is God's passion.

'In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth. In his law the islands will put their hope.' (Isaiah 42:3,4)

Sometimes justice and mercy challenge us because they conflict like magnets repelling each other. We meet people in great need who ask for mercy, yet we ask questions of justice. Is this fair? Do they deserve different? Many questioned the Boiler Rooms involvement with the excluded teenagers of Reading. Who would pay for that broken window? Did we invite trouble when we made friends with these kids, as another wallet is stolen? Sometimes our situations of injustice shattered us and all we wanted to do was give up. Yet Jesus encouraged us on. At the Cross, mercy and justice come together. There justice was done for our sin but the mercy of God embraced us 'whilst we were still sinners' (Romans 5:8).

In the Lord of the Rings, the relationship between Gollum and Frodo highlights the conflict of justice and mercy, yet that is also the beauty of their relationship. Gollum was a murderer and Sam knew he would do it again, given half a chance. Justice demanded his death, but mercy enabled Frodo to see the tragedy of Gollum's life from the perspective of his own burden of the ring. He knew it was the ring that had warped him; he knew that he could very easily walk down that path too. He remembered the words of Gandalf:

*'Deserves death! I daresay he does. Many that live deserve death. And some that die deserve life. Can you give that to them? Then be not too eager to deal out death in the name of justice, fearing for your own safety. Even the wise cannot see all ends.'*⁵

The mercy and justice that beats at the heart of God must move us to do the same. He has shown us mercy; therefore we should lay down our own lives (Romans 12:1). If justice is the foundation of God's throne, it should be of our lives too (Zechariah 7:9) Would God be merciful to us if we fail to show that kindness to others? (Matthew 5:7, James 2:13)) What justice should

⁵ The Lord of the Rings – JRR Tolkien (George, Allen & Unwin 1968)

we expect in our lives if we fail to show that to others (Isaiah 58). Mercy and justice flow through the character of God. They should flow through ours too.

Friends

Working at Reading Boiler Room became an immense privilege. Day to day we met some incredible and courageous young people who challenged almost everything we knew, or thought we knew. Again, I need to credit and thank Malc and Penny Peirce, without whom we might not have even met these teenagers. Most good youth ministries have behind them a few faithful individuals and Malc and Penny fall firmly into that bracket. Before the Boiler Room existed, there were many hard Saturdays working often on their own.

The principles we began to learn were in the context of relationships. With young people, with the homeless, with needy families. In Staines, Wandsworth, Calgary and Kansas these same applies. Real learning took place in real life. It brought some hard lessons. Jesus was a 'friend of tax collectors and sinners' (Luke 7:34). The difference between being a friend of and being a friend to sinners is massive. Jesus chose the route on relationship, and there in Reading he was inviting us the same way.

One of our friends was Mike who struggled to attend school regularly for a number of reasons. We chatted often about how school was, celebrated when he managed a full weeks attendance, and stood with him when things weren't so good.

Then there was Liz, who would spend most Saturdays drunk in the local park. Liz was 14. Saturday was when she forgot about her week and got drunk with her mates. Often we would end up taking her in to be with her as she was sick. Her friends would come in too and gather round. I was often amazed by the sense of commitment friends had to each other. The sense of community was strong.

We made friends with Paul, who is currently in Prison. Paul would sometimes be violent, sometimes be the kindest man you could meet. He struggled with drugs and alcohol. He often lived rough, once we found him sleeping in a disused railway carriage. Paul would steal to finance his drug habit. He was eventually arrested and was at the end of a two-year spell in prison at the time of writing. Paul would often write to us and joined a Bible study group in Prison. He 'knew that God was around for him'.

These friends were just a smattering of those we met in our two years in the Forbury Vaults. It seemed like the mercy of God was drawing the lost and lonely to our door. It almost seemed like the justice of God cried out into the neighbourhood and brought the excluded and downtrodden in, to challenge us and to find a home.

‘Re-shaping the existing order’

‘The method of the Churches impact on society at large should be twofold. First the church must announce Christian principles and point out where the existing social order is in conflict with them. Second, it must then pass on to Christian citizens acting in their civic capacities, the task of re-shaping the existing in order in closer conformity to it’s principles.’⁶

William Temple wrote this challenge to a church that already played a major part in society and social change. Now we write in times Government Welfare programmes attempt to care for the needs of the poor. Now poverty is often hidden and those in need are those outside of the systems reach. Now as much as ever, the church is called to be an agent of change.

‘Say no to wrong. Learn to do good. Work for justice. Help the down and out. Stand up for the homeless. Go to bat for the defenceless.’ (Isaiah 1, The Message).

This mandate can be expressed both locally and globally, and it could be argued there is an imbalance if we do not look at both. God might encourages us to show practical care for sex-workers who walk our streets at night, maybe prompting us to investigate the social causes of prostitution. But in this time of unprecedented global connections, what is he highlighting to us in the nations? The reality is that our times are also those of global poverty, where the needy often finance the growth and success of the richer nations. You could make a difference.

Standing with the wronged

To live justly means we should be angered by what is wrong. To be merciful in those situations often means to stand with the people who are wronged.

Jesus walked out to John, to meet him in the desert and to be baptised. John couldn’t believe that he was coming to him. ‘I need to be baptised by you, and do you come to me?’ (Matthew 3:14). But Jesus went for it. It was ‘to fulfil all righteousness’; to be obedient to his Father, to fulfil prophesy, but also it was about standing with the people.

He ‘did not consider equality with God something to be grasped’ (Philippians 2:6) so he gave it all up, he ‘became flesh and moved into the neighbourhood’ (John 1). John’s baptism was for the forgiveness of sins, yet here was the sinless Christ. Why bother? Part of the answer was that he chose to stand with humanity, with the lost, with the poor, with the wronged. He chose to stand with the people. We should do the same.

Jesus chose to associate himself with the poor. He was questioned why he hung out with ‘sinners and tax collectors’ but he did not come to ‘call the righteous, but sinners.’ (Matthew 9:13). Jesus had compassion on the crowds, cared for the outcast, had tea with the tax collector, allowed himself to be worshipped by the prostitute. Jesus stood with those who were wronged. He stood up against the Pharisees, as they blocked the door to God for the poor. He stood for them, we should do the same.

⁶ William Temple – ‘Christianity and Social Order’

Mercy and justice demands that we stay and talk to the street sleeper, rather than avoiding eye contact when he asks for money. They demand that we stand up for the unjustly treated. They demand that we treat people with kindness, regardless of their race or background. They demand that we truly love the sinner, even if our faith demands that we hate the sin.

Investing in the Designed not the Deserved

'There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be open-handed towards your brothers and towards the poor and needy in your land' (Deuteronomy 15:11)

Over the last 5 years I have made some good friends in a dutch community called 'The Foolish Things.' From their Amsterdam base they reach out into the red-light area and amongst other things run a café, opposite the Central Station. The café, which acts as a relational base for their work as well as a fully functioning business is called 'Dwaze Zaken', which means 'foolish business'.

The Foolish things are into mercy and justice. To live by those principles is truly 'foolish business'. The cross was 'foolish business'. It made an offer to a sinful world before we had made a step. Mercy is 'foolish business', it is about the designed, the loved, the created; it's not about the deserving.

About a month after we opened Reading Boiler Room we let the building be used for a Saturday prayer gathering. Intercessors and church prayer people gathered to pray for the young. They called out to God that the young would feel comfortable to come to church, that the church would reach out to them. At the end of the prayer meeting, many came to me and complained. They complained about the Goths and Skaters hanging out there. They complained that they couldn't park their cars because young people were skateboarding in the car park. They complained about the noise from the young people in the prayer room. They complained about the very thing they were praying for.

The teenagers of the Forbury might not have been deserving in their eyes, but the mercy and justice of God was already at work, calling them in. I learnt an important lesson that day.

Practicing Mercy and Justice

Our God is a God who acts. He is not all about words, but his gospel works, his hand still intervenes on behalf of the defenceless. He gets involved.

'The victims faint pulse picks up; the hearts of the hopeless pump red blood as you put your ear to their lips, orphans get parents, the homeless get homes, the reign of terror is over, the rule of gang lords is ended' (Psalm 10 from the Message).

We can live out a life committed to kindness, to justice and mercy. It is possible. To live that way is not an unattainable dream. It does require action though. Like Peter we need to get out of the boat. As I've approached trying to live justly I've found these four prompts helpful.

1. Respond to the poor. Each Boiler Room asks itself a question. How will the poor be affected by what we do today? Will they be welcome? Will our choices and decisions affect them? Will that affect be positive or negative?

'Like slavery and apartheid, poverty is not natural. It is manmade and it can be overcome'
*Nelson Mandela*⁷

Many consider poverty an issue for the third world. But in the western world, poverty cuts a powerful, but often invisible swathe. In the United States in 2001 32.9million lived below poverty line (11.7% of the population), with 11.1million of those children.⁸ 23.3million turned to agencies for help in 2001, 40% from working families. This is a global problem.

You will have poverty that needs tackling in your street, in your communities and probably in your churches. Maybe unemployment, maybe sickness, maybe circumstances have contributed, but poverty is there. Are there ways your church or community could respond?

2. Respond to need. Many Boiler Room's live out this part of the rule, simply by responding to need. Whether it be with disadvantaged children in Kansas City, excluded young people in Staines or with first nation people's in Calgary, Boiler Rooms try to help when they're asked.

This can often be done in partnership. If you feel challenged to feed the homeless in your community, then look around you first. I would expect someone is already doing it, maybe you could partner and support rather than 'recreate the wheel'. Why not ring your local Homelessness charity and ask how you could help. We're often tempted to start things ourselves but sometimes the biggest thing we can bring is our time to others. Sometimes the last thing we need is the limelight.

'nurture a love to do good things in secret....be content to go without praise'
*(Jeremy Taylor)*⁹

3. Respond with prayer. Sometimes we're not going to be able to fix the problem, but our prayers can move mountains. Our action must be accompanied by passionate and persistent prayer. We must live as though it all depends on us, and pray as though it all depends on him.

⁷ Make Poverty History launch, February 2005

⁸ Statistics from Bread for the World www.bread.org

⁹ The Rules and Exercises of Holy Living – Jeremy Taylor

"And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones who cry out to him day and night?" (Luke 18.7)

4. Responding with action. Boiler Rooms are committed to campaigning and educating on issues of injustice. Factors that create poverty globally must be address and we can play our part. There are more issues and campaigns worthy of action that I can record so I'll end this chapter with an issue that is important to me as I write this.

Over the last year I have continually felt God challenge me to respond to is the global Arms trade. It's perhaps one of the more hidden injustices in our world. In 2004, one third of the world population was at war. War contributes to poverty, human suffering and to many of the social and economic problems faced in the neediest parts of our world. For example, despite promising an 'ethical foreign policy'¹⁰ on coming to power in 1997, the British government continues to sell arms to 15 of the world's poorest countries. In December 2001, a deal to sell a £28 million radar system to Tanzania was publicised. This to a country with an average income of £200 a year. Despite continuing global conflicts and the widespread acceptance of the need for developing nations to not spend money on arms; the five biggest arms dealers globally continue to be the 5 permanent members of the UN security council; Britain, USA, France, China and Russia.

'He has shown you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.' (Micah 6:8)

For further thought

Engage with a local issue of justice or mercy. Volunteer for a night at a local shelter for the homeless. Go out with a charity working with needy families. Buy a meal for a street sleeper and sit down and eat and chat with him. Commit to research an issue of global injustice. With both, take time to review after one month what you have learnt and how you might be able to get involved long term.

Liturgy

Leader: Lord, You are God of the nations.

All: Let justice roll on like a river and righteousness like a never failing stream.

Leader: Lord, you place kings and leaders on their thrones.

¹⁰ From a speech by then UK Foreign Secretary, Robin Cook, May 12 1997.

All: Let justice roll on like a river and righteousness like a never failing stream.

Leader: Lord, you see the dark places of our cities.

All: Let justice roll on like a river and righteousness like a never failing stream.

Leader: Lord, you are the defender of the widow and the orphan.

All: Let justice roll on like a river and righteousness like a never failing stream.

Leader: Lord, we pray for the poor and for the downtrodden.

All: Let justice roll on like a river and righteousness like a never failing stream.

All: Lord forgive us when we organise our meetings, only to forget the poor. May justice and righteousness be present in our churches and in the way we live our lives.

Amen