

Social Justice: An Institution of God or of the State?

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By: Jonathan Patterson

To many political conservatives, the term “social justice” reeks of progressive liberalism—the idea of state-mandated “redistribution of wealth.” Yet the idea of “social justice” is neither something that we can/should ignore nor is it simply to be a rallying cry for the political left. In fact, “social justice” is a biblical mandate, the neglect of which can have (and has had) disastrous consequences.

In the middle of the 8th century BC, Amos was called out of his homeland in the southern kingdom of Judah to prophesy against the social and political ills plaguing the northern kingdom of Israel. (That is not to say that the southern kingdom had it all together at this time, but simply that God’s focus for Amos was on Israel.) Amos begins his prophetic pronouncement with a series of oracles against the surrounding nations, which must have been music to the ears of the Israelites who had warred against these other nations for so long. But his most lengthy discourse is reserved for the nation, the gist of which is summed up in Amos 3:2: “Only you have I known from all the families of the earth; therefore I will hold you accountable for all of your iniquities.”

While it is true that the sins of Israel were great, including sexual immoralities and the desecration of true worship, perhaps the sin that most heavily permeates the prophet’s message is the lack of social consciousness (i.e., social injustice). The wealthy and political elite in Israel were living lavishly while the poor and needy were neglected and, either intentionally or through apathy, oppressed by the upper classes. Amos addresses these wealthy elite as “cows of Bashan” (4:1). Bashan was known for its rich, fertile land that produced exquisite livestock, and the cattle in this region were renowned (think Kobe or Wagyu beef!). The imagery Amos used here was of a people who were reaping all of the benefits of a plush existence, and they were doing so off the backs of the poor and needy (Amos 5:11). While they maintained the cultic and religious practices, Amos makes it clear that Israel’s “religion” had become hollow and void of any significance. “I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the peace offerings of your fattened animals, I will not look upon them” (Amos 5:21–22).

What good were the religious practices of Israel when the “least of these” were being overlooked and neglected, at best, or actively oppressed, at worst? As the Church, the body of Christ in this present age, we might also ask ourselves the same thing. What good are our religious practices, our Sunday morning worship, even our tithes, if we neglect or oppress the “least of these” among us? Can we not—indeed, should we not—expect that God will spurn our religious rituals in the same way He did Israel’s if we have not committed ourselves to addressing the welfare of those less fortunate among us?

Perhaps the single greatest punishment the prophet Amos described is found in 8:11, when God declared that a great famine would be unleashed upon Israel—“not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord” (emphasis added). Separation from God would be Israel’s greatest punishment, and that separation would become a reality when Israel was

driven from her land (her promised land) by the invading Assyrian army just 30 years after Amos delivered his message.

I recently read an article regarding the growth of the Church in China and growing tolerance of the Church by the Communist party there. The article concluded with a quote from a house-church elder in Beijing who observed that full religious freedom in China (i.e., lack of any oppression, restrictions, etc.) would spell the end of the Christian Church in China. In the middle of the 8th century BC Israel was enjoying a time of great peace. The kingdom was experiencing a time of political and financial wealth not seen since the days of Solomon. It was a time of exceeding comfort for those in power, both in terms of financial comfort and geo-political stability; and that comfort bade ill for a genuine commitment to following the Law with both hands and heart.

American Christians, by and large, experience perhaps the greatest amount of religious freedoms in the history of the world while also enjoying the greatest financial stability (yes, even we poor seminary students are better off than most of the rest of the world!). In our comfort, many of us have forgotten that “as [we] did it to one of the least of these”—whether we have fed, clothed, and cared for, or neglected, overlooked, and oppressed—we have done it to God himself. The issue of social justice—the care and welfare of “the least of these”—should not be an issue taken up by the State, but rather it is a biblical mandate for all of God’s people to follow. The welfare of the less fortunate among us—the widow, the orphan, the homeless, the oppressed—should be our burden to bear, not because the State mandates it and/or taxes us accordingly, but because the care of, and love for, our fellow man is what distinguishes us as the people of God. And when we fail to do so—when we neglect the “least of these”—perhaps we should not be surprised or disgruntled when the State steps in and does so for us. In fact, when we fail to act on behalf of the poor and needy, government intervention should be the least of our concerns!

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