



***Biblical Justice and Mercy:
How Should Christians Engage Society?***

Redemption Hill Church – Position Paper.

Approved by the Overseers of RHC

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Position Paper on Biblical Justice and Mercy

God cares about those who are hurting, needy, and oppressed. As Christians, we should care about what God cares about. The following discussion is an attempt by the overseers of Redemption Hill Church to present what the Bible teaches about the topic of “justice and mercy” and its relationship to the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This paper defines “justice and mercy,” lays out our convictions of what the Bible has to say about this topic, unpacks a few important practical issues, and concludes with a statement of our church’s vision and values to help guide us in the future. We are aware that disagreements exist among Christians on this issue and so have sought diligently to stay close to what the Bible teaches throughout.¹

Definitional Question:

How do we define “biblical justice and mercy”? What is included; what is excluded?

Answer: “Justice and mercy” is our selected label—derived from the Bible itself—for activities that address the needs of the poor, oppressed, and marginalized in society. Justice and mercy ministries include ministries of compassion, but sometimes also include a Christian response to injustices in society. The most common biblical categories for this discussion are the widow, the orphan, the poor, and the immigrant. We have decided to avoid the term “social justice” because of the sometimes-charged political overtones that attach to that label. We have also decided against the term “social concern” (on its own) because of the possibility of being “concerned” without doing anything. Similarly, we have avoided simply labeling this sphere of activity with the term “compassion” (even though it is a good biblical term) because sometimes people feel compassion without acting on those feelings.

Biblical Issues:

1. What is the biblical basis for justice and mercy?

Answer: In every period of biblical history, we see a focus and encouragement toward acting with justice and mercy.

- In the Old Testament Civil Law

He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing. Love the sojourner, therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt. (Deuteronomy 10:18-19)

¹ In our opinion, a good entry into this topic is the short book by Timothy Keller, *Generous Justice: How God’s Grace Makes Us Just* (New York: Dutton, 2010).

But there will be no poor among you; for the LORD will bless you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance to possess—if only you will strictly obey the voice of the LORD your God, being careful to do all this commandment that I command you today. (Deuteronomy 15:4-5)

If among you, one of your brothers should become poor, in any of your towns within your land that the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be. (Deuteronomy 15:7-8)

- In the Example of Job

...because I delivered the poor who cried for help, and the fatherless who had none to help him. The blessing of him who was about to perish came upon me, and I caused the widow's heart to sing for joy. I put on righteousness, and it clothed me; my justice was like a robe and a turban. I was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame. I was a father to the needy, and I searched out the cause of him whom I did not know. I broke the fangs of the unrighteous and made him drop his prey from his teeth. (Job 29:12-17)

If I have rejected the cause of my manservant or my maidservant, when they brought a complaint against me, what then shall I do when God rises up? When he makes inquiry, what shall I answer him? Did not he who made me in the womb make him? And did not one fashion us in the womb? If I have withheld anything that the poor desired, or have caused the eyes of the widow to fail, or have eaten my morsel alone, and the fatherless has not eaten of it (for from my youth the fatherless grew up with me as with a father, and from my mother's womb I guided the widow), if I have seen anyone perish for lack of clothing, or the needy without covering, if his body has not blessed me, and if he was not warmed with the fleece of my sheep, if I have raised my hand against the fatherless, because I saw my help in the gate, then let my shoulder blade fall from my shoulder, and let my arm be broken from its socket. For I was in terror of calamity from God, and I could not have faced his majesty. (Job 31:13-23)

- In the Cries of the Psalmists

O LORD, you hear the desire of the afflicted; you will strengthen their heart; you will incline your ear to do justice to the fatherless and the oppressed, so that man who is of the earth may strike terror no more. (Psalm 10:17-18. Note that the entire Psalm deals with this topic.)

Malicious witnesses rise up; they ask me of things that I do not know. They repay me evil for good; my soul is bereft. But I, when they were sick—I wore sackcloth; I afflicted myself with fasting; I prayed with head bowed on my chest. I went about as

though I grieved for my friend or my brother; as one who laments his mother, I bowed down in mourning. But at my stumbling they rejoiced and gathered; they gathered together against me; wretches whom I did not know tore at me without ceasing; like profane mockers at a feast, they gnash at me with their teeth. How long, O Lord, will you look on? Rescue me from their destruction, my precious life from the lions! (Psalm 35:11-17)

- In the Prophets:

...learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause. (Isaiah 1:17)

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? (Isaiah 58:6-7)

Therefore because you trample on the poor and you exact taxes of grain from him, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not dwell in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine. For I know how many are your transgressions and how great are your sins—you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and turn aside the needy in the gate[the court]. Therefore he who is prudent will keep silent in such a time, for it is an evil time. Seek good, and not evil, that you may live; and so the LORD, the God of hosts, will be with you, as you have said. Hate evil, and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the LORD, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph. (Amos 5:11-15)

He has told you, O man, 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)

Thus says the LORD of hosts, “Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another, do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor, and let none of you devise evil against another in your heart.” (Zechariah 7:9-10)

- In the Ministry of Jesus:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” (Luke 4:18-19, quoting Isaiah 61:1-2a)

Jesus is often described as “having compassion” on people and acting upon the compassion he felt throughout his ministry (Matthew 9:36; 14:14; 15:32; Mark 6:34; 8:2; Luke 7:13; 10:33.)

- In the Teaching of Jesus:

Various places in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7; cf. Luke 6:20-49)

Then the King will say to those on his right, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.” (Matthew 25:34-36)

The Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37)

He said also to the man who had invited him, “When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.” (Luke 14:12-14)

The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31)

- In the Teaching of the Apostles

Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:16-21)

Only, they [James, Peter, John] asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I [Paul] was eager to do. (Galatians 2:10)

So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith. (Galatians 6:10)

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body. (Hebrews 13:2-3)

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world. (James 1:27)

If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.” (James 2:8-9)

If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? (James 2:15-16)

Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned; you have murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you. (James 5:4-6)

- Throughout the Bible: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” (Leviticus 19:18 [note the context]; Matthew 22:39 [and parallels]; Romans 13:9-10; Galatians 5:14; James 2:8)

2. What is the mission of the church?

Answer: The central mission of the church is making disciples (Matthew 28:18-20). This includes leading people to faith in Christ, training them to know what they believe and how to live it out, and releasing them on a mission to do the same with others (2 Timothy 2:2).

Justice and mercy intersects with disciple-making in a couple different ways.

- When justice and mercy are found within the community of faith and are exercised toward those outside the community a powerful non-verbal message that we really believe what we claim to believe is communicated (1 John 3:17; Gal 6:10; James 2:15-17; John 13:34-35). Such activities will help people who do not know Christ to come to Christ as they see the truth of our profession lived out toward them and within our own community of faith.
- Modeling and teaching newer believers how to live out their faith in acts of compassion (alongside of evangelism) is an excellent way of helping someone develop as a disciple of Christ. It also is one of the best ways to prepare newer believers to be released on the mission that God has for them.

3. Is there any priority of verbally proclaiming the gospel message over being involved in deeds of justice and mercy?

Answer: Yes.² Verbal proclamation of the gospel message is to have priority because the New Testament makes it clear that eternal things are ultimately more important than temporal things (Matthew 16:25-26). A person's eternal salvation is therefore more important than meeting physical needs or aiming to institute a just society. In order for people to place their faith in Jesus Christ for their eternal salvation, they must first hear the verbally proclaimed message (Romans 10:14-17).

Our intentional use of the word “priority” does not mean that engaging in deeds of justice and mercy is not vitally important to us. Jesus prioritized love of God over love of neighbor (“first,” “second”) but clearly did not intend for people to stop loving their neighbors as a result. Similarly, we are persuaded of the biblical priority of gospel proclamation and still want to affirm that deeds of justice and mercy should be a natural and necessary outcome of growth into Christ-likeness. Some seem to believe that they have fulfilled the Great Commission by digging a well in an impoverished area of the world—a view we reject because it misses the heart of our mission. At the same time, others seem content to merely share the verbal message without addressing the pressing needs of human suffering—a view we reject because it violates the mandates of both the Old and New Testament, fails to address the clear deed component of the gospel of the kingdom, undermines the credibility of the gospel, and fails to accurately embody the heart of God for the world.

We believe that the following Scriptural evidence shows that verbal proclamation of the gospel message is to be given priority, but not to the exclusion or de-emphasis of involvement in activities focused upon justice and mercy.

Evidence:

- When Jesus defines his ministry in Luke 4:18-19 in terms of the Messianic expectations of Isaiah 61:1-2a, both proclamation and deliverance from poverty and bondage are included. But proclamation has primacy of place as is evidenced by the use of the word “proclaimed” three times in these two verses.
- The various “great commissions” of Jesus (Matthew 28:16-20; Luke 24:44-49; John 20:21; Acts 1:8) center on proclamation.
- The book of Acts, while including care for the believing poor (Acts 2:44-47; 4:32-37; 6:1-6) is repeatedly and insistently about the spread of the good news about Jesus.

² An articulate representative of the contrary opinion is Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006), 316-323.

- The Apostle Paul, while demonstrating that he cares about practical righteousness (Romans 12:9-21; 15:25-28), clearly emphasizes the preaching of the gospel (1 Corinthians 2:2; 2 Corinthians 5:11-21; cf. Acts 26:16-18). He expresses his longing for and asks prayer about getting the gospel out, not for meeting the physical, social, and justice needs of others (Romans 1:13-17; Ephesians 6:19-20; Philippians 1:12-22; 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12). He appears to have been more upset about the gospel being distorted than about social evils being left unaddressed (e.g. Galatians 1:6-9; 1 Timothy 1:3-7; 4:1-4).
- When Jesus says to “let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” in Matthew 5:16, it appears that he is focusing upon the actions of believers as viewed by unbelievers. But the primary purpose of these good works in Jesus’ own words is to bring people to a place of glorifying God in heaven, rather than in the suffering that is alleviated by the doing of the good works.
- The reality of eternal heaven and hell speaks clearly to the need to prioritize the proclamation of eternal salvation over the short-term alleviation of injustice or suffering.
- When Jesus is asked about the greatest commandment (Matthew 22:35-40), he prioritizes loving God over loving neighbor. This does not mean that loving of one’s neighbor is not crucial, but simply that a loving relationship with God is primary.
- The actual emphasis of the New Testament documents is on the gospel. If one were to simply count up how many verses emphasize the gospel message in some way compared to how many verses emphasize deeds of justice and mercy, there would be far more that emphasized gospel proclamation.

Thus, gospel proclamation is to take priority over efforts toward justice and mercy. This does not mean that we must complete all verbal proclamation before addressing suffering. Nor does it mean that proclamation will always trump activities focused upon justice and mercy. But the bias of movement should be in the direction of proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ with the goal of producing disciples. In practice this means that we will seek to invest most heavily in spreading the gospel through words even while encouraging deeds of justice and mercy.

4. How much of a difference can we expect to make? What is the extent of the breaking in of the kingdom of God in the present?

Answer: We believe that there are future aspects to kingdom issues (Matthew 25:34; Matthew 26:63-64 and parallels; cf. Daniel 7:13-14; Acts 1:6) and present aspects to kingdom issues (Luke 17:20-21; Matthew 12:28; Luke 15). It is only in the future—after the return of Christ—that the kingdom of God, including perfect justice, will be fully established on the earth. At the same time, we believe that there is an initial in-breaking of the kingdom through

the community of faith clustered in local churches. These churches show what the kingdom is/will be like as they carry out gospel-saturated, compassionate, and just ministries in their own midst and in relation to the world.

- In stating the issue this way we are consciously denying a position that would relegate to the future everything about the kingdom in the Bible. Those who hold that the biblical teaching about the kingdom is entirely focused upon the future often present an overly pessimistic picture of how much impact Christians can have in effecting societal change in the present. We believe that Spirit empowered communities of Christ-followers can make an important difference in society while still acknowledging that only Jesus at his second coming can establish a thoroughly just world.
- But in stating the issue this way we are also consciously denying a position that would try to make the biblical teaching about the kingdom entirely or almost entirely about the present. Those who over-emphasize the present (“realized”) aspects of the kingdom often under-emphasize—or even entirely neglect—gospel proclamation and the imperative of rescuing people from eternal condemnation. Once again: We believe that Spirit-empowered communities of believers can make an important difference in society while still acknowledging that only Jesus at his second coming can establish a thoroughly just world.

5. Are there levels of responsibility? Do we have greater responsibility for some than for others?

Answer: Yes. Family is the closest circle, followed by the family of faith/the church, followed by the world.

- In Mark 7:10-13, Jesus did not permit the giving to the temple of one’s goods that were needed to support one’s family.
- “But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.” (1 Timothy 5:8; cf. 5:16)
- “So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.” (Galatians 6:10)

Wisdom Issues:

1. Is there some sort of prioritizing of compassion over addressing systemic injustices? (Note: ministries of compassion are like offering aid and care to people who have been poisoned by toxic waste that has been dumped into their source of drinking water; addressing systemic

injustices is like trying to find out and stop whoever has been dumping the waste into their water.)

Answer: Both are important, but encouragement to show compassion to the poor receives greater emphasis in the Bible than does addressing systemic injustices, though we think that the second also is a clear biblical teaching.

2. Does advocacy on behalf of the downtrodden and oppressed take precedence over supporting policies that protect our freedoms?

Answer: Yes. Advocacy on behalf of the defenseless is a clear biblical imperative and theme; defending personal political freedoms has little biblical support. This does not mean that Christians should avoid any and all political engagement, particularly since we in the United States live under a government that is to be by the people and for the people. We also recognize that the categories of defending the defenseless, on the one hand, and defending personal rights, on the other, sometimes overlap. But we want to acknowledge that God unmistakably calls upon his people to care for and defend those who are downtrodden and helpless whereas there is no such parallel encouragement in the Bible that Christians should pursue political action to defend their freedoms. We are attempting to emphasize what the Bible emphasizes.

3. Should the church directly take on ministries of justice and mercy?

Answer:

- We think that occasionally a church can take on a specific area of justice and mercy as a regular ministry of the church. Church leaders should be careful, however, not to commit to something that will overwhelm the other ministries of the church or draw too many resources away from the regular ministries of the church. (And some social needs are easily able to overwhelm any church.)
- We think that normally it is wiser for bigger projects (like running a pregnancy care clinic or systematically helping those who are homeless) to be carried out in partnership with organizations that can be more focused than churches can be.
- Furthermore, we affirm that individual believers should be encouraged to engage society in any way that they think can make a difference. In addition to acts of compassion and defending the defenseless, such engagement—depending upon the individual—could include participation in politics, the arts, or intellectual engagement with society, or, in another vein, hosting block parties, participating in local schools, and taking meals to neighbors in need. But this does not mean that the church *as the church* should take on all such activities as official ministries of the church. In the majority of such cases, we believe that it is wiser for church leaders to focus upon teaching and modeling how

Christians should live in the world and then releasing those individuals to go make a difference in the ministries God puts before them to do.

4. Should churches or individual believers respond to every instance where there is a clear example of suffering or injustice?

Answer: No. Need by itself does not constitute an imperative to act. It is not a sin either for an individual or a church to focus attention upon the plight of the unborn, or upon racial reconciliation, or digging wells in an impoverished nation (as long as evangelism is not forgotten). This may mean that a particular individual or congregation does not address sex trafficking, the annual monsoons in Southeast Asia, or unjust immigration laws. No individual or church can be involved in everything. We do think, in light of the biblical pattern established above, that Christians *ought* to be involved in some way in defending the poor and defenseless and seeking to extend justice and mercy. This responsibility is more pronounced closer to home, but we dare not ignore the needs of the whole world.

Summary of Ministry Vision and Values at Redemption Hill Church

We believe that:

1. God is deeply concerned about needy people on the margins of society. He expects us to show mercy and promote justice.
2. *Every* believer *ought* to be involved in relieving suffering as a vital part of living for Jesus in this world.
3. That said, the primary mandate for the church is to make disciples. Gospel proclamation should take priority over issues of justice and mercy. (See more nuanced discussion above.)
4. Proper discipleship necessarily results in a heart for and actions oriented toward relieving suffering.
5. Our involvement in activities of justice and mercy demonstrates the transforming power of the gospel in practical ways and thereby supports our calling to effectively reach the world for the Lord Jesus Christ.
6. Justice and mercy activities are valuable in and of themselves and do not need to be coupled with proclamation of the gospel to be worthwhile. However, given our limited resources and the size of the need, we must choose our involvement in suffering relief as strategically as possible.

In light of the above:

- We—as leaders of Redemption Hill Church—call on all members of our church to cultivate God’s heart of justice and mercy and adjust their lifestyles in light of this heart, participating in corporate and personal acts to relieve suffering in the world. We further encourage our members to prayerfully follow God into major endeavors of this type, and to use their resources and talents for the glory of God in a full range of suffering relief and culture shaping activities.
- We commit to periodically educate, equip, and challenge individuals, families, and life groups to be involved in such activities through exposure to needs and training in means. We will also do what we can to support individuals in pursuing the ministry opportunities God brings them in this area. Where appropriate, we may give a specific ministry some type of resourcing or a “bigger platform” within the congregation. As a rule, however, we will not highlight, recruit for, or offer funding for the individual passions our members have. Most often leadership support will focus on prayer, encouragement, and guidance. We cannot and should not take on everyone’s individual burden.
- We will provide opportunities for wide participation in justice and mercy activities for the church family each year.
- We will focus our efforts on leading people in the congregation toward developing hearts and actions that are increasingly in line with God’s concern for the oppressed and needy. We are not content to simply give money or find new projects for a few of us to get involved in; we want to see the broadest possible cross-section of the congregation engaged in actively caring about those who most are in need of justice and mercy.
- Given our limited resources and the emphases we see in scripture we will focus our attention *as a church* more upon activities that have greater direct impact upon individuals and families who are in need than upon trying to address broad structural injustices (as important as they may be).
- Given the essentially infinite need in the world from the vantage point of one small church, we will always seek to have an organic connection between our corporate ministries of justice and mercy and the planting of the church in the world. This connection does not require every activity to lead directly to sharing the gospel, but there does need to be a real strategic connection.