

2009

Doing Justly (The President's Desk)

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Recommended Citation

Gane, Roy (2009) "Doing Justly (The President's Desk)," *Perspective Digest*: Vol. 14 : Iss. 4 , Article 5.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pd/vol14/iss4/5>

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Roy E. Gane

These days, many national and international news stories cry out for justice. The need for justice has been around for a long time.

DOING JUSTLY

legal” have it backwards. They should read: “It’s not only illegal, it’s wrong.” Right and wrong are the basis on which justice is built.

There were unjust people way back in the days of the prophet Micah. Rather than admitting their wrong, they were trying to cover up for their mistreatment of others by making offerings to the Lord. That seemed like a profitable strategy. When you are making a killing, a donation doesn’t dent your bottom line. It’s cheap grace.

As C. S. Lewis pointed out in *Mere Christianity*, our sense of right and wrong can come only from a wise Creator; it cannot come from mere mechanistic evolution.² There is moral rightness in the principle that I am my brother’s keeper. No such rightness comes from the notion that the monkey in the zoo is his keeper’s brother.

But Micah reminded: “He has shown you, O man, what is good; And what does the Lord require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?” (6:8, NIV).¹

What happens when justice is lacking? Greed and oppression take over. Big businesses become like reverse Robin Hoods, taking from the poor to give to the rich. There is lack of trust, which can create conflict on any level of human interaction.

Justice is fairness, treating other people as you would wish to be treated (Matt. 7:12). It is respecting boundaries between your rights and theirs. It protects us from ourselves and from each other. Justice is the law, but it is more than the law.

Recently, in the Netherlands, I chatted with a notable business professor from the Free University of Amsterdam. He said that a lot of the current international financial crisis results from lack of trust among the world’s major international banks. History teaches us that between na-

Signs that discourage shoplifters by saying: “It’s not only wrong, it’s il-

tions, injustice and lack of trust often result in wars.

We need social justice, which was a huge concern of the Hebrew prophets, including Micah. Early Adventists were strong advocates of social justice, especially with regard to the imperative of freeing the United States from the moral leprosy of slavery. Within the last century, however, Adventists have tended to avoid social justice issues. This may at least partly be due to our desire to separate church from state. If a social justice issue becomes a political issue, which it inevitably does, we don't want to touch it because we don't want to get into politics.

Like Jesus, we should stand up for what is morally and ethically right, according to God's principles, and let political chips fall where they may. We must continue strongly to advocate separation of church and state. But that shouldn't silence us from speaking out against discrimination and oppression. Christians should be leading in this, "the head and not the tail" (Deut. 28:13).

Obedience to God's principles of justice, which protect us, is not legalism. Legalism is misuse of law, but following God's law for its intended purpose is common sense.

As our best Friend, God guides and warns us. He knows what is best for us because He made us. His instructions are like the manufacturer's manual that comes with your

car. The manufacturer tells you to put oil in the crankcase, so that's what you do. You don't regard obedience to that direction as legalism or disregard it by putting in water instead.

My wife and I were backpacking in northern Israel in 1987. We decided to take a shortcut across a field. But there was a sign in Hebrew at the edge of the field, and we didn't know the word. We looked up the word—*moqshim*—in our little dictionary, and it meant "land mines"! Was it legalistic to heed the warning? Did we give up being free—free to have a blast? That kind of freedom is downright expensive: It can cost an arm or a leg!

In Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28-30, God made it clear that the purpose of His commands and warnings is to protect His people and lavish His blessings on them. This is so that others will be drawn to Him. Evangelism through excellence! He can do this only if we follow His instructions, as Daniel did in the court of Babylon. If God blesses us when we ignore His wise counsel, He will send a mixed message to the world. If there is no difference between God's people and those around them, God's people fail to serve as channels of revelation for Him in the world.

God's law is good for those who keep it (Lev. 18:5), but it cannot help those who break it. So His laws can

never be the means of salvation from sin. Rather, they are for people who are already saved. It was only after He delivered Noah and his family from the Flood that He established His covenant with them (Genesis 9). It was only after He rescued the Israelites from Pharaoh's clutches that He inaugurated His covenant with them and gave them the Ten Commandments, as well as other laws (Exodus 19–24).

Politicians make campaign promises, are inaugurated, and then we see if they will deliver. God delivers on His promises before the inauguration. Our obedience is only a response to His grace, which has already saved us.

Of course, principles of justice can't do their job unless there is accountability to them. To "do justly," we need internal accountability, with the gift of God's law of love written on our hearts (Jer. 31:33; Rom. 5:5), knowing that He provides the empowerment for obedience and is aware of everything we do.

The story is told of a minister who rose to address his congregation: "There is a man among us who has been flirting with another man's wife. If he does not put five dollars in the offering plate, his name will be read from this pulpit." When the offering money was counted, there were 19 five-dollar bills and a two-dollar bill with a note attached: "Other three pay day." It's amazing how forthcoming

we are when we think that what we do has come to light!

Dennis Prager, a Jewish radio talk-show host in Los Angeles, has said that he doesn't trust anyone who does not believe in God. His reason is that only a sense of accountability to God is powerful enough to restrain people adequately from hurting one another.

Nothing is hidden from God, the One who really matters. So the only sensible approach is to say with David: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my anxieties; and see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (Ps. 139:23, 24). To those who love and trust God, this is reassuring, not threatening.

Hannah Senesh was a young Hungarian-Jewish resistance fighter in World War II. She was captured by the Nazis, who interrogated her with torture and finally executed her by firing squad. Hannah had written a number of poems in modern Hebrew. The example on the next page dates from 1942.

We do have Someone to whom we can absolutely entrust everything, including all our deepest secrets, and He will never betray our trust. He understands and sympathizes because He has been tempted in all points as we have, yet without sinning (Heb. 4:15).

He has absolutely proven his love by dying for us. He is with us, what-

Could I meet one who understood all . . .
Without word, without search,
Confession or lie,
Without asking why.

I would spread before him, like a white cloth,
The heart and the soul . . .
The filth and the gold.
Perceptive, he would understand.

And after I had plundered the heart,
When all had been emptied and given away,
I would feel neither anguish nor pain,
But would know how rich I became.³

ever happens, “even to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20). That is the best assurance we can ever have. If we have Him, we have assurance of eternal life (1 John 5:12). We can have another opportunity to “do justly” because “He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1:9).

REFERENCES

¹ Unless otherwise designated, all Scripture references in the article are quoted from the New King James Version of the Bible.

² C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1981), pp. 18-23.

³ “Loneliness,” translated from Hebrew by Ruth Finer Mintz, in *Hannah Senesh: Her Life & Diary* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), p. 253.