

Good Question! Are we supposed to speak out on behalf of the oppressed?

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The third question in our Good Question! sermon series is “Are we supposed to speak out on behalf of the oppressed?” You might think the answer is rather obvious (and you might be right), but that’s only part of the issue. As important as it is to think through our responsibility towards those who are oppressed, it’s also quite critical that we understand what oppression means, where it comes from, and how much we should prioritize this work in the grand scheme of God’s calling on us as his church. So, I don’t want to merely answer our question; I’m going to try and give you a little more: a more robust theology about oppression itself and our responsibility to help people who are suffering under the weight of injustice.

I’m going to trace this theme of oppression through the lens of the Book of Isaiah (turn there). Like all prophetic books, Isaiah was written because something was wrong. God’s people, those whom God loved and saved, rejected and turned away from him. Now, a reckoning is coming; they have to answer to God. That was the message of the prophets. In chapter 1, he summarizes both the problem and the solution that he’s going to explain in much greater detail throughout the rest of the book. Isaiah doesn’t waste time and gets at the heart of the matter immediately in the beginning of chapter 1. He touches on their sin emphasizing how they have turned away from God. He spends some time criticizing their worship since it’s all show and no heart. In vs. 16, he tells them what they should be doing differently. “Wash yourself” God says. Turn away from your sin, turn back to me, and do the good works that I require. And then look at what he says a life following him looks like (vs. 17); “learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow’s cause.” So right away in chapter 1 God includes *correcting oppression*, pursuing justice as integral to walking with Him. We’ll see that going forward, but that should be a pretty big clue as to how God sees the importance of pursuing justice.

Let me take a step back for a minute and address a bigger point. Some of you, I’m guessing, have heard the word *shalom*. It’s a Hebrew word that is most frequently defined in English as *peace*. But that doesn’t quite capture the richness and the depth of this word. Shalom describes the flourishing and wholeness that comes from submitting yourself to God. This flourishing can be experienced both individually and corporately. In a home, it looks like husbands and wives happy in their service to one another; parents and children understanding their roles and submitting to one another out of reverence to Christ. In a society, you would see governing officials providing servant leadership to those under their charge. You would find a citizenry gladly obeying the laws of the nation and helping their neighbors. People with differing opinions and backgrounds would work together for the common good while celebrating their differences and appreciating one another. Everyone, of course, would be submitting themselves to God. That’s shalom.

One way of thinking about sin is the vandalism of shalom. It's an attack on the peace of God, the blessing and flourishing of God that he intends for individuals and for the common good of society. In a world where shalom is vandalized, selfishness always trumps love for God and others. I don't know what your assessment is, but I would argue that our world is not experiencing much shalom. So much of what I just mentioned seems to be severely lacking in our personal and public lives. Even sadder, we - the church - fail to advance the shalom of God in the world because we're so passive, indifferent, and selfish. We can actually contribute to the decay happening around us instead of being a part of the solution.

What's the point: this is where oppression comes from. Oppression is a consequence when people abandon God. When shalom is destroyed between the powerful and the weak oppression emerges. We see this in Isaiah 3. The prophet is highlighting the consequences when shalom is not pursued and prioritized; pay special attention to the last verse (READ vs. 1-5). This same idea is brought up in Micah 7 where God says, "Don't trust your neighbors; have no confidence in your friends." In a shalom-deprived world nobody can be trusted. This is where oppression comes from.

You know, oftentimes we conceive of sin only as breaking God's law. What's certainly true is that all of our sin is first an offense against God. David says in Ps. 51, "Against you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight," by which I think he means our sin against God is always our first and biggest problem. But our sin contributes to the vandalism of shalom in our world; our sin perpetuates oppression. When a father beats or ridicules his son, he's an oppressor. When an employer mistreats her employees she is an oppressor. When Enron executives fudge the numbers and then sell before the crash, they are oppressing their employees, stockholders, and the public. When a coach mistreats a kid out of anger, he's an oppressor. Yes, indeed, sin is breaking God's law, falling short of his glory, but it is also theft, murder, adultery against other people made in the image of God and that vandalizes shalom.

Isa. 59 picks up on this theme identifying the sins of the nation not just as breaking God's law, but hurting and oppressing others. Listen to these verses (READ vs. 7-8, 12-15). How utterly scary it would be to live through a time where you have to do evil to keep safe. I remember hearing stories from our global partners from Romania how corruption is rampant there that to get anything done you have to bribe officials. So you're caught in this dilemma: Do we offer the same bribes to make progress in our work, or do we refuse and remain on the outside looking in? You know shalom has been vandalized when you have to be corrupt just to buy yourself some safety.

I don't mean to be overly depressing, but oppression will never be eradicated on this side of heaven. As long as the present age exists with its powers of darkness, we'll always see humans taking advantage of one another. But while we won't be able to eradicate oppression from the earth; our hope, prayer, and confidence is that God will indeed eradicate it once and for all at the second coming of Christ.

Something else to include in your theology of oppression is that it's something the powerful do to the weak. There are instances in the scriptures where oppression is used in rather general terms as harm done one to another; anyone can harm another and in that way can be an oppressor. But more frequently, the Bible talks about oppression as abusive treatment from those who have against those who do not; oppression is how the powerful hurt the weak to stay powerful and to keep the weak in their place.

In Lev. 19:13 we read, "You shall not oppress your neighbor or rob him." How might you oppress your neighbor? The following words give us the answer (vs.13b-14), "The wages of a hired worker shall not remain with you all night until the morning. You shall not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall fear your God: I am the Lord." The workers, the blind, the deaf... these are people who are vulnerable to the abuse of others. Fear God, FBC; the Lord is an avenger for those who are vulnerable. So, when we think about a theology of oppression, we need to be mindful of the power dynamics at play. Those in positions of power have a unique opportunity to take advantage of others. God says that is not ok.

So, think about the various areas of in our world today where power structures exist. Certainly, in a place of employment, there is a power structure. If you're an employer or a supervisor, you have unique influence over those who work for you. You have a distinct ability to make life a blessing or a curse for your employees. We've already seen this from the examples of the scriptures where landowners or masters are told explicitly not to withhold wages (depriving them of their income), but to pay a man or a woman what you owe them for their work.

When I send my kids to school, I tell them to respect and submit to their teachers authority; I think all good parents would do such a thing. Teachers, you could take advantage of that. You could take advantage of a student's submission to hurt those in your charge. That's a form of oppression.

I know some of you work in law enforcement or you have family or friends in law enforcement; thank God for our public servants and their dedication to the good of our community. We certainly don't pay them enough; we can at least give them our respect. But those in law enforcement (cops, district attorney's, judges) have incredible power; they are given the responsibility to adjudicate justice. Thankfully, it's rare to find a crooked cop or judge. But because they have such a big stick, it's particularly damaging and despice when their's a miscarriage of justice for selfish gain and that's why we see on the news when it happens.

Those also in a prime position to oppress would be governing officials. God has given the state, those in a governing position, the sword - the power to execute justice by force. But what kind of government do we have in America? We have a system of government *by the people, for the people*. When you live in a monarchy or a dictatorship it's easy to blame the king or the tyrant for the injustices around you. But if you live in democrat republic where the people have a critical say, who's to blame now? That might be fodder for a lively debate that we can't

have this morning, but I wonder what sins I'm committing by my civic passivity. These are difficult questions, but I'm trying to point out to you the places in which we might be responsible to God for the oppression around us.

So, this is a good place to make the turn to this question: what's our responsibility? As followers of Jesus, what should we be doing with the possible injustices around us? The first and obvious one is this: don't perpetuate or practice oppression. Don't be an oppressor yourself. That's the first and best way you stop oppression; your oppressive behavior is, without a doubt, that which you are most accountable to God for.

One of my favorite secular and cultural authors is Jordan Peterson. One of his 12 rules for life is this: Set your house in perfect order before you criticize the world. The emphasis of this rule is that tending to the ways you personally contribute to the injustices is a prerequisite to being able to effectively handle the oppression and injustices outside of you. And these passages that we've been looking at have this focus. When God says through Isaiah in Isaiah 1, "correct oppression," who's oppression does he mean? He means their own! He's saying, "Stop your corruption! Quit being an oppressor! Change the life of the nation by all of you, both individually and corporately, repenting of the oppression you are committing!" He wasn't saying, "Correct the oppression of the Syrians to the north of you." Correct your oppression. And, friends, that starts with an inner transformation.

Pursuing justice, refusing to practice or participate in oppression is a baseline requirement of followers of Jesus. I'm reminded of the passage in James we've talked about recently in SS. James 1:27 says, "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans, and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world." If you're going to take advantage of orphans and widows, if you're going to practice oppression on those who are vulnerable, you might well cancel your worship services and keep your offerings. God despises them; our outward signs of worship are only going to be evidence that God uses against us when he judges us for our sin.

Now, while not practicing oppression is a baseline, correcting oppression outside of us does not seem to be the primary calling of the church. As I read my NT, I do not see a major emphasis or focus given by God to the church to make this their primary work. The primary work God has given the church is to make disciples. Spread the good news of Jesus Christ far and wide so that there are more worshipers within the family of God. Preach the gospel so more people experience the inner transformation that rescues them from being oppressors. Keep teaching the faithful the truth of God so that their lives remain a worthy witness of Christ as the pressures and temptations mount. That's the focus of the NT teaching for the church.

Now, I understand the urge to do something when we see oppression. We've got to do something for the lives of the unborn. A prophetic voice is needed where racism exists. Even our political discourse, as ugly and as repulsive as it is to many of us, needs the truth and character of Christ. But that's not our first mission field; it's not our first work. It's one we don't

want to neglect, but I don't believe it should be our primary focus. That's one of the reasons I don't mention the weekly headlines much around here. I don't want to bury my head in the sand, but at the same time I want us to look above all that's worldly to see what's heavenly because that's the only way we can keep the right perspective.

Should we speak out on behalf of the oppressed? Yes we should. But more so we shouldn't be practicing oppression ourselves. And when and where God calls us to step up and intervene we will why we keep pointing others to the one who will eradicate oppression perfectly.