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**Psalms 82:3–4, ESV.**

<sup>3</sup> *Give justice to the weak and the fatherless;  
maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute.*

<sup>4</sup> *Rescue the weak and the needy;  
deliver them from the hand of the wicked.”*

**Our faith is our bond.**

Today, Christianity is badly fragmented. The main division is between conservative and liberal Christians, between those who focus heavily on a literal interpretation of the Bible and those who focus on using their faith as an organizational tool for the service of social justice. My personal view is that our faith should be our bond, and that all Christians should be able to walk into a church, leave their differences behind to overheat in their cars, and then honor their God together and support each other in their faith. But today, what I want to talk about is social justice. Is it true that turning one’s Christian faith toward the legal rights and the defense of people who have been marginalized by society is directly rooted in the Bible? Or is taking up social justice only a natural extension of having empathy and love for those in need, something that is inspired by the words and actions of Jesus, as described in the Gospels? Let’s step back and look at the Testaments, Old and New.

The one Gospel that we are confident was written by a true associate of Jesus, someone who personally witnessed Jesus' life and his ministry, the Apostle John, made it clear that Jesus was not on earth to take part in human politics. While Jesus ministered to the poor, to the disabled who were typically reduced to living as beggars, and to those cancelled by society, this is what John says of Jesus after he feeds five thousand with a boy's modest lunch and the crowd reacts by proclaiming him to be the long-awaited Jewish Messiah:

*<sup>15</sup> When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.*

The Apostle John tells us that Jesus did not want to be elevated to the level of an earthly king, the Messiah whom the Jews had longed for, the man who was supposed to crush the oppressors of God's people. From the Egyptians to the Babylonians to the Assyrians to the Persians and to their current conquerors, the Romans, the Chosen People had waited for the king who would establish a holy kingdom on Earth. Even as late as Jesus' final ride on a donkey into Jerusalem, most of his people thought that he would be an earthly king. When they found out that he was there to create a Heavenly kingdom, they demanded that Pilate crucify him. But just because you don't want to be an earthly king does not mean that you don't want to actively defend people from their oppressors.

Yet Jesus went further in distancing himself from worldly issues. He ignored much of what was going on around him. There was economic, social, and physical oppression going on in the Roman Empire. They conquered peoples across a huge swath of the known world, with the Roman Empire eventually stretching from what is now Great Britain all the way to North Africa. In the year 70 A.D., 30 or so years after Jesus was crucified, some Jews revolted against the Romans. In retaliation, Titus, a Roman General, besieged Jerusalem. They captured many, many Jews and crucified them. Then the Romans broke through the Jews' defenses, massacred much of the population, and destroyed the Second Temple. Surely, Jesus would have known, as the son of God, that this was going to happen shortly after he left Earth. Why didn't he move to prevent it?

Later in the Gospel of John, Jesus is talking to Pilate, who initially does not want to crucify him. Here is their interaction, with Pilate speaking first:

*"I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?"* <sup>36</sup> Jesus answered, *"My kingdom does not belong to this world. If my kingdom belonged to this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here."* <sup>37</sup> Pilate asked him, *"So you are a king?"* Jesus answered, *"You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."*

Those words *"my kingdom does not belong to this world,"* are very frequently quoted. In sum, while Jesus showed great compassion for those who were

oppressed by both the Romans and by his own religious authorities, he stayed out of politics. He wouldn't have had to create his own empire to replace that of the Romans in order to change the lives of those who lived under colonial oppression, but Jesus never tried to change the system at all. He went to his death without making any attempt to find freedom for his people. He was certainly no activist.

There was one particularly brutal form of oppression going on in the Roman Empire. It was slavery. The predominant source of slaves was prisoners of war. Julius Caesar sent back a million slaves to Rome during his wars. The Romans enslaved Jews, too. Roman law allowed slaves to be brutalized by their owners without any legal consequences. While slaves were found at all levels of society, with some of them holding very responsible positions as physicians, architects, and teachers, most were laborers. As much as 30% of the people living in Rome itself were slaves. Jesus is surrounded by slavery. Jesus not only does nothing to stop slavery: in a seemingly insensitive way, he tells 13 parables that involves slaves. That's how common slaves were in his society, so much so that they were fodder for the lessons of Jesus. These are Jesus' words, as quoted in Matthew. Keep in mind that when you read the word "servant" or "bondservant" in the Bible, the original Greek word is usually "slave". The NIV tends to use the original language and say "slave". Here is that parable from Chapter 24, from the NIV:

<sup>45</sup> *“Who then is the faithful and wise slave, whom his master has put in charge of his household, to give the other slaves their allowance of food at the proper time? <sup>46</sup> Blessed is that slave whom his master will find at work when he arrives. <sup>47</sup> Truly I tell you, he will put that one in charge of all his possessions. <sup>48</sup> But if that wicked slave says to himself, ‘My master is delayed,’ <sup>49</sup> and he begins to beat his fellow slaves, and eats and drinks with drunkards, <sup>50</sup> the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour that he does not know. <sup>51</sup> He will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*

Jesus is telling us to remain prepared at all times for the coming of God, that we must live every moment of our lives as if it were the last – and what does Jesus do? He uses a parable about a lazy slave who abuses other slaves and then as punishment gets cut to pieces. Now, there are a few explanations for this. One is that slaves were simply everywhere in society and Jesus was talking in a way that his listeners could relate to. Another is that, as it turns out, this storyline, in different forms, was widely told during Jesus’ time: people were familiar with stories about slaves getting cut to pieces. Jesus is just bootstrapping his parable off a familiar tale. Another is that Jesus isn’t concerned about slavery in society. He is preparing a Heavenly kingdom where there would be no slavery for eternity.

The rest of the New Testament is filled with stories about slavery. Paul wrote a letter that we call Philemon, after the name of the man to whom Paul wrote the letter. In this very short letter, Paul asks Philemon to allow Paul to continue to make use of a slave belonging to Philemon. The slave is named Onesimus, which

means “useful”, and apparently Onesimus has stolen money from Philemon and then run off to Rome, presumably to blend in with the population of a large city. But Onesimus meets Paul – who is a prisoner at the time – and becomes a believer. Onesimus then becomes Paul’s hands and voice by carrying out Paul’s evangelistic efforts while Paul is in prison. Here is what Paul writes to Philemon:

*<sup>13</sup> I wanted to keep Onesimus with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; <sup>14</sup> but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. <sup>15</sup> Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, <sup>16</sup> no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother—especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.*

*<sup>17</sup> So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. <sup>18</sup> If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. <sup>19</sup> I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it.*

Paul is sending Onesimus back to Philemon, but he hopes that Philemon will then send Onesimus back to Paul. Paul is offering to pay off whatever Onesimus stole. He tells Philemon to consider Onesimus “*no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother*”. This is the heart of the New Testament’s stance of slavery: not that it should be ended, but that all people, rich man as well as slave, are equal in God’s eyes. We are told this repeatedly, that slavery is an evil earthly thing, not a godly thing, and that once people make the decision to follow Christ, they are equal brothers and sisters in God’s eyes, no matter what their status in human society.

But importantly, neither Jesus nor Paul, nor the author of any other book of the New Testament, moves to end slavery in the Roman Empire.

It's not true, though, that there is no defense of human rights in the New Testament. Consider the Gospel of Luke, Chapter 11, where Jesus challenges the Pharisees, the leaders of the local synagogues in Jerusalem:

*<sup>42</sup> "But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and herbs of all kinds, and neglect justice and the love of God; it is these you ought to have practiced, without neglecting the others. <sup>43</sup> Woe to you Pharisees! For you love to have the seat of honor in the synagogues and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces. <sup>44</sup> Woe to you."*

Mint, rue, and herbs grew wild and had very little value. Jesus is saying that the Pharisees offer these up to God, that they are hypocritical believers who, while pretending to be good people, let poor people offer what they cannot afford.

Consider the following Beatitude, one of the wisdom statements that are delivered by Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew:

*<sup>6</sup> "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."*

It seems clear that Jesus is promising that people who are denied their rights will one day be given their rights. It's just that he's not promising it will happen on Earth. There's no question that Jesus passes up multiple opportunities to rise up and take command as the activist Messiah. This, of course, does not mean that we are not supposed to defend and protect those who are vulnerable.

Remember that it was Jesus who told us that the Ten Commandments of the Old Covenant could be summarized and subsumed by just two commandments:

*“ ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ <sup>38</sup> This is the greatest and first commandment. <sup>39</sup> And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ <sup>40</sup> On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”*

If Jesus commands us to love our neighbor as ourselves then we’re not doing that by allowing them to languish as a slave or to be treated in an unrighteous way.

Let’s turn to the Old Testament. Here are two verses of Psalm 82:

*<sup>3</sup> Give justice to the weak and the fatherless;  
maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute.*

*<sup>4</sup> Rescue the weak and the needy;  
deliver them from the hand of the wicked.”*

This is pretty clear. These words of wisdom are attributed to Asaph, who is thought to be a singer and a musician who served under Kings David and Solomon. It tells us protect the rights of orphans, and those who are sick or poor. We are to actively rescue those who cannot protect themselves and who are in need, and we are to deliver these people from evil people.

Let’s look at some words spoken by the great prophet Isaiah. It’s from Chapter 1, where Isaiah is delivering an Oracle, the words of God:

*<sup>17</sup> learn to do good;  
seek justice,  
rescue the oppressed,*



*defend the orphan,  
plead for the widow.*

Again, we are being commanded, this time by God, to protect the rights of the oppressed and those who cannot defend themselves.

So, to sum up, the best way to state the New Testament stand on human rights and social justice can be found in Galatians. Paul is writing to the members of a church that he founded, telling them that Gentile followers of Christ do not have to become Jews first. They must follow Jesus, not Jewish law:

*<sup>28</sup> There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. <sup>29</sup> And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.*

Jesus did not come to earth to end inequality. But he did tell us to treat all people equally. The overriding philosophy of the New Testament, when it comes to acknowledging the equal rights of all people, is that when it comes to faith, when it comes to our relationship with God, we are all equal. Rich or slave means nothing in the eyes of God. All that matters is that we believe.

On the other hand, the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, contains more direct statements than the New Testament demanding that we take action as people of God to defend the rights of others. This makes sense, given two things.

First, the ancient Jews were more rooted in the here and now, more concerned with life on Earth than with an afterlife. Second, in the New Testament, the focus is on all of us walking in the Kingdom of God together, not walking in the Kingdom of Humans. However, there is no question that defending the innocent and the at-risk, and on defending the rights of every human as having been made in the image of God, runs throughout the Old and the New Testament. So, fighting for social justice is very much in line with our faith. Our faith is indeed our bond, and that bond says we are all equal in God's eyes. Rather than offering a final prayer, I'd like to describe a simple act that I witnessed when I was a young boy.

I had a friend who went to school with me. We attended the same church. His mother was a single mom and at one point she lost her job, and it was a month or so before she found another one. It caused her to miss her rent payment two months in a row. I was in my friend's rented house one day when the owner of the house came by to explain that she was going to have to move out because she hadn't been paying her rent. After she explained her situation, this man said that he was a Christian, and so he would just go ahead and forgive two months' rent. Amen.