

Justice

STUDY NOTES



SECTION 1: JUSTICE AND HUMANITY

00:00 - 01:22

Jon: If you were a praying mantis, it would be socially acceptable to devour your mate.

Tim: And if you're a honey badger, you have no regard for other animals; you don't care.

Jon: If you're a panda with twins, it's normal to abandon one to take care of the other.

Tim: But if humans do any of these things, we would call it wrong, unfair, or unjust.

Jon: Yeah, why is that? Why do humans care so much about justice?

Tim: Well the Bible has a fascinating response to that question. On page one, humans are set apart from all other creatures as the image of God.¹

Jon: Yeah, God's representatives who rule the world by his definition of good and evil.

Tim: And this identity, it's the bedrock of the Bible's view of justice. All humans are equal before God and have the right

1. See Genesis 1:26 for more. Be sure to check out the "Image of God" theme video!

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to be treated with dignity and fairness no matter who you are.²

Jon: And that would be nice if we all did that, but we know how the world really works.

Tim: And the Bible addresses that too; it shows how we're constantly redefining good and evil to our own advantage at the expense of others.

Jon: Yeah, self-preservation. And the weaker someone is, the easier it is to take advantage of them.

Tim: And so in the biblical story, we see this happening on a personal level, but also in families, and then in communities and in whole civilizations that create injustice, especially towards the vulnerable.

SECTION 2: JUSTICE IN SCRIPTURE

01:22 - 03:20

Tim: But the story doesn't end there. Out of this whole mess, God chose a man named Abraham to start a new kind of family. Specifically, Abraham was to teach his family to keep the way of the Lord, by doing righteousness and justice.³

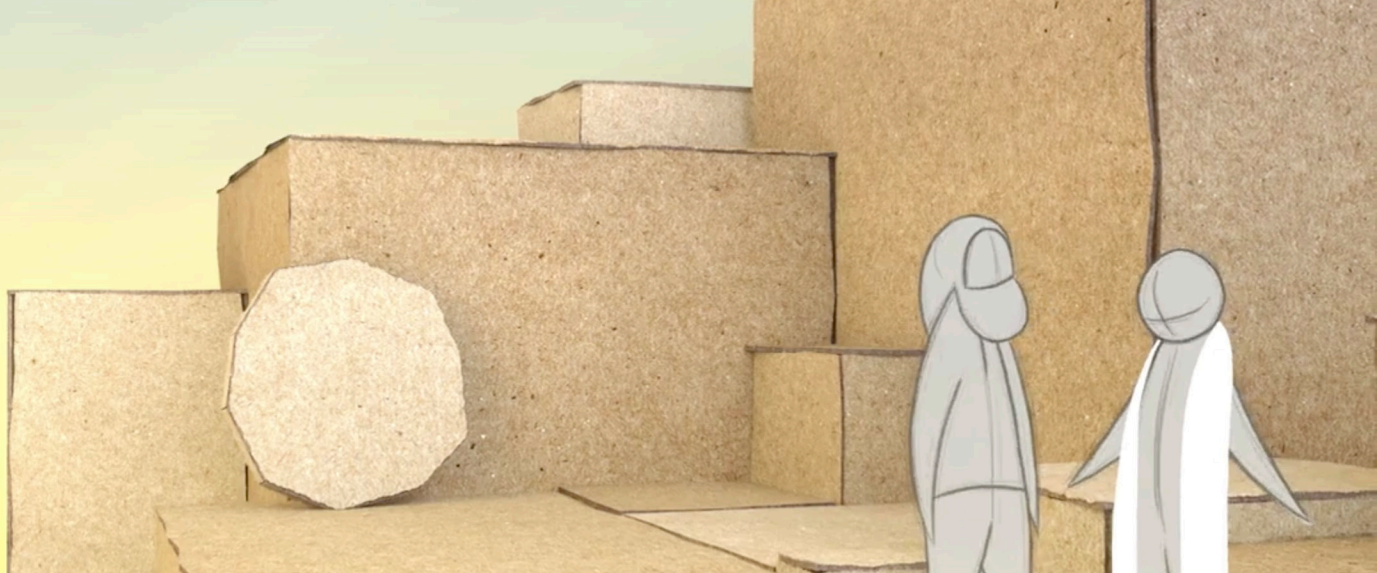
Jon: Doing righteousness? That's a Bible word I don't really use, but what comes to mind is being a good person.

Tim: But what does that even mean, "being good?" The biblical Hebrew word for righteousness is *tsedeqah*, and it's more specific. It's an ethical standard that refers to right

2. This is a unique Jewish-Christian contribution to the history of human civilization. For contrast, the entire Greek-Roman political system was built on the concept that all humans were not created equal. Aristotle argued that only rational humans (which did not

include slaves) were equal. Therefore slavery was deemed just and right.

3. You can see this in Genesis 18:19. See also Deuteronomy 4:5-8 for how God revealed the covenant laws to push Israel in the direction of greater justice and righteousness.



relationships between people; it's about treating others as the image of God.

Jon: With the God-given dignity they deserve.⁴

Tim: And this word justice, it's the Hebrew word *mishpat*. It can refer to retributive justice.

Jon: Like if I steal something, I pay the consequences.

Tim: Exactly, yet most often in the Bible, *mishpat* refers to restorative justice. It means going a step further, actually seeking out vulnerable people who are being taken advantage of and helping them.

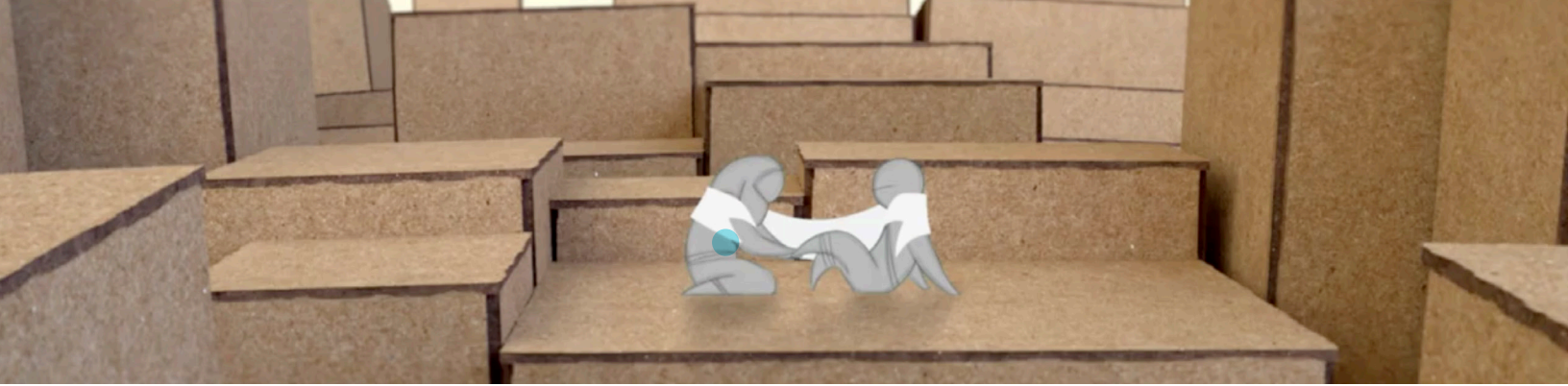
Jon: Yeah, some people call this charity.

Tim: But *mishpat* involves way more. It means taking steps to advocate for the vulnerable and changing social structures, and prevent injustice.⁵

4. Look at it this way. *Tsedeqah*: the standard of right relationship between all people. *Mishpat*: the actions you do to create the standard of *tsedeqah*. Look up Job 29:12-17 for a good definition of biblical *tsedeqah*.

5. The restorative aspect of *mishpat* makes sure everyone in the community receives fair treatment and is given what they are due, such as their rights.

For example, the Levite tribe did not inherit land but served in the temple. They therefore received a tithe or temple tax from the other tribes. This was the Levites' *mishpat* or "their right." See Deuteronomy 18:1-3. Furthermore, the widow, orphan, immigrant, and the poor composed "the quartet of the vulnerable," a layer of society in Israel which also had unique *mishpat*. See Zechariah 7:9-10.



Jon: So justice and righteousness are about a radical, selfless way of life.

Tim: Yeah, and you find this idea all over the Bible. Like here in the book of Proverbs. What does it mean to bring about just righteousness?

Jon: It's about advocating for people who can't speak for themselves.⁶

Tim: And what do these words mean for the prophets, like Jeremiah?

Jon: Bring about just righteousness, don't tolerate oppression against the immigrant, orphan, and widow.⁷

Tim: And like here, look in the book of Psalms.

Jon: "God upholds justice for the oppressed, gives food to the hungry, sets the prisoners free, but he thwarts the way of the wicked."⁸ Whoa. Thwarts the wicked? What does that mean?

Tim: Yeah in Hebrew, the word wicked is *rasha'*; it means guilty or "in the wrong." It refers to someone who mistreats another human, ignoring their dignity as an image of God.⁹

6. See Proverbs 31:8-9. Discuss: Who are those who can't speak for themselves in your society today?

7. You can read this in Jeremiah 22:3. See also Isaiah 11:1-5. The Messianic hope of the prophets was for a king who would perfectly bring *tsedeqah* and *mishpat*.

8. See Psalms 146:7-9.

9. "The righteous are those who are willing to disadvantage themselves to the advantage of their community; the wicked are those who are willing to disadvantage the community to advantage themselves." - Bruce Waltke

Jon: So righteousness and justice is a big deal to God.

Tim: Yes. It's what Abraham's family, the Israelites, were to be all about. They ended up as immigrant slaves being oppressed unjustly in Egypt. And so God confronted Egypt's evil, declaring them to be *rasha'*, guilty of injustice, and so he rescued Israel.¹⁰

Tim: But the tragic irony of the Old Testament story is that these redeemed people went on to commit the same acts of injustice against the vulnerable. And so God sent prophets who declared Israel guilty.

Jon: But they weren't the only ones. Injustice is everywhere.

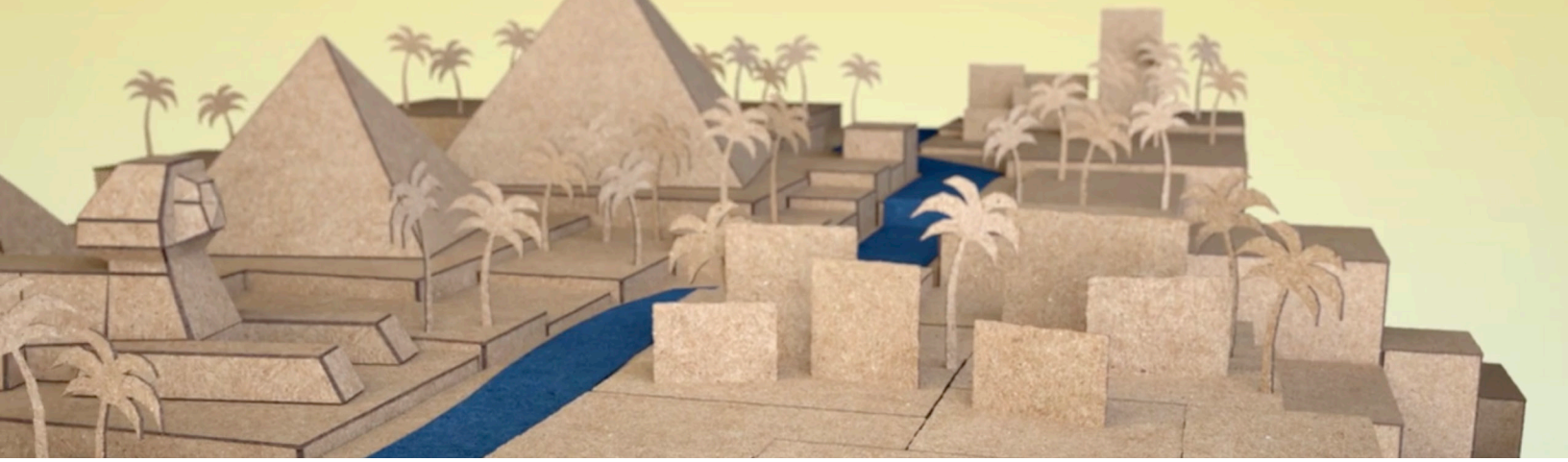
Tim: Yes. Some people actively perpetrate injustice. Others receive benefits or privileges from unjust social structures they take for granted, and, sadly, history has shown that when the oppressed gain power, they often become oppressors themselves.

Jon: So we all participate in injustice, actively or passively, even unintentionally. We're all the guilty ones.

Tim: And so this is the surprising message of the biblical story. God's response to humanity's legacy of injustice is to give us a gift: the life of Jesus. He did righteousness and justice, and yet he died on behalf of the guilty.¹¹

10. See Exodus 6:5-6 and Deuteronomy 20:20-24.

11. In Jesus, God's love and justice are perfectly fulfilled. God is just in his judgements on corrupt Israel and humanity by the court sentence of guilty. God's judgement is an act of love as he puts himself in the place of the guilty.



But then God declared Jesus to be the righteous one when he rose from the dead. And so now Jesus offers his life to the guilty, so that they too could be declared righteous before God not because of anything they've done, but because of what Jesus did for them.¹²

Jon: The earliest followers of Jesus experienced this righteousness from God not just as a new status, but as a power that changed their lives and compelled them to act in surprising new ways.

Tim: Yeah, if God declared someone righteous when they didn't deserve it, the only reasonable response is to go and seek righteousness and justice for others.

Jon: This is a radical way of life: making other people's problems my problems, advocating for the vulnerable, making sure that we all rise together.

Tim: This is what Jesus meant by loving your neighbor as yourself, and it's not easy, and it's not quick. It's about a lifetime commitment fueled by the words of the ancient prophet Micah. "God has told you humans what is good and what the Lord requires of you: is to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God."¹³

12. The poor are often the first to grasp this. Jesus moves specifically towards the poor, lepers, widows, orphans, and outsiders. They are included in his family. See Luke 14:12-14.

13. See Micah 6:8. In context, Micah exposed how wealthy, land-owning

leaders of Israelite cities were running the economy. They were guilty of buying land from low income landowners through bullying (Micah 2:2), changing land boundary lines (2:4-5,9), bribing local judges and prophets (chapter 3), and rigging weights and measures to their favor (6:10-11).