

# What Does the Old Testament Say about Social Justice?

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The cry for justice is all over the headlines in our newspapers and TV newsrooms. And this is not just a modern phenomenon. Justice, or the lack of justice, has been an issue in every society throughout history.

But just what is justice? This article will be looking at justice from a biblical viewpoint. In particular, what we find in the Old Testament.

## Defining Our Terms

According to Mounce's Complete Expository Dictionary, the Hebrew word *mišpâṭ* is generally rendered "justice" or "judgment," and carries a legal or judicial connotation, though it is used in variety of ways. And this is often how we think of this word, passing judgement on wrong doers and exacting an appropriate penalty on them.

But, while it is indeed used this way in the Old Testament, it has a much more significant usage. *Mišpâṭ* also is concerned with the way we treat other people, doing what is right by them. And this is especially true for the most vulnerable members of society – those whose rights are so often trampled on by the strong.

## The Weak and the Strong

Throughout human history some people, for one reason or another, have become powerful and risen above those around them. Sometimes this is because of where they were born in society. At other times it is because of their ability that allows them to rise above their birthplace. As a general rule, these people are better off than the majority of folks.

At the other end of the spectrum are the weak and powerless. These folks generally have little voice in their society and struggle in life. Throughout most of history this group has included orphans and widows, along with the handicapped and outsiders.

The natural human tendency seems to be that the powerful will use the weak to their own advantage; becoming stronger and wealthier at the expense of the most vulnerable members of society. And over time, the strong become stronger, and the weak become weaker, until the weak have no voice at all. They often become little more than a commodity to be used by the strong and then discarded.



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## Teaching about Justice

Much of the Torah is a summary of the law God gave to Israel through Moses. This law contains many similarities to the other law codes of the day. But one notable exception is that God's law protects the helpless and underprivileged in society. In most contemporary societies – both then and now – widows, orphans, and the poor had/have few rights.

Some examples of the teaching about justice from the Law would include:

[Deuteronomy 24:17](#): “Do not deprive the foreigner or the fatherless of justice, or take the cloak of the widow as a pledge.”

[Leviticus 25](#): The Sabbath Year and the Year of Jubilee are examples of protections built into the law to protect the poor, ensuring that they did not stay in slavery.

[Leviticus 25:35-37](#): Laws dealing with charging interest protected the poor from being charged high interest on loans.

[Deuteronomy 14:28-29](#): Provision was made to ensure that foreigners, orphans, widows and the Levites had enough to eat.

God's expectation is not just that judicial justice would prevail. But that acting justly toward others would also be a priority. That we would be doing what is right in our dealings with other people. Rather than taking advantage of those who are weaker than we are, we should be using our strength to elevate them.

Justice was a common topic among the prophets as well. [Micah 6:8](#) is very explicit about the call to act justly. He tells us that "He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly (mišpâṭ) and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." What does God want from us? At the head of the list is to act justly and to love mercy.

And it is not just something we are expected to do. God himself is just. [Psalm 146:7-9](#) expresses that God "upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry . . . watches over the foreigner and sustains the fatherless and the widow." And God expects no less from us.

### **Actual Practice**

But throughout the history of Israel, we find that the justice God demands is often missing. The strong oppressed the weak, getting stronger at the expense of the most vulnerable. You do not have to read through the prophets very far to find their denunciation of this oppression of the poor at the hands of the rich.

We often see the fall of Israel as primarily one of idolatry. And indeed, that was a major problem in Israel. But the problem of social justice was also a contributing factor in the downfall of the nation. In [Jeremiah 22:1-5](#), Jeremiah delivers a message from the Lord to the king of Judah. He tells him to "Do what is just (mišpâṭ) and right. Rescue from the hand of the oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place." He then tells the king that if he does these things the kingdom will endure. But if not, they are headed for destruction.



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## The Consequences of Failure

In the end, Israel fell because they refused to listen to God's prophets and follow the correction they gave. Israel fell to Assyria in 722 B.C., and Judah fell to Babylon in 586 B.C. They both were removed from the land and went away into exile.

From Babylon, Daniel offered a prayer of confession, acknowledging the sin of his people that had sent them into exile. In this prayer he said "we have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and have rebelled; we have turned away from your commands and laws (mišpâṭ). We have not listened to your servants the prophets" ([Dan. 9:5-6](#)).

While the [NIV](#), and many other translations, translates mišpâṭ as laws, it is the word for justice. Daniel's prayer acknowledges that they are in Babylon because of their sin and because they have turned away from God's justice. The abuse of the weak at the hands of the strong contributed to their fall as a nation.

## A Call to Social Justice in Our World Today

I know of no nation today that lives under the Old Testament Law. And yet it has much to tell us of what God expects of people, of what is pleasing to him. And central to that is the idea of social justice. We should take heed to the voices of the Old Testament prophets who called out for justice. God still cares about the weak, the orphans, widows, foreigners, and the poor. And I believe he will still hold us accountable for the way that we treat them.

I believe that the words of [Proverbs 31:8-9](#) are just as important for us today as they were for the ancient Israelites. "Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy."

And they are echoed in [Galatians 6:10](#) where Paul says, “Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.”

Much of the social unrest that we are experiencing in the United States now could be resolved if we would simply follow the direction in the [Bible](#) concerning social justice. To care for the poor, the weak, and the disadvantaged. And to demonstrate God’s love to all that we come into contact with.

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