



Stewardship in the First Testament

Lesson 4: A Table Set With Justice

Overview

This lesson explores how biblical sacrifice and hospitality are connected to justice, especially for the vulnerable. Participants will reflect on how worship, generosity, and justice belong together and what it means to “set a table” that reflects God’s concern for all.

Preparation for the Teacher

- Read the excerpts from Exodus 19:10–24 in the lesson below. Also read Deuteronomy 14:22–29, Isaiah 1:10–14, Amos 5:21–24, and Micah 6:6–8.
- Watch the video—it may stimulate additional questions appropriate for your context.
- You may want to bring a loaf of bread to pass around at the end of the discussion period, asking everyone to take a piece and hold it to eat at the end of the closing prayer.

Background

A Christian understanding of giving is grounded ultimately in the sacrificial life of Jesus. But “sacrifice” in this context is often misunderstood. Many of us tend to think of ritual sacrifice as an offering made to appease an angry God. The idea is that humans have done something wrong and now must slaughter an animal whose shed blood will soothe the righteous wrath of God. This idea that God demands blood sacrifice for sin, in fact, runs directly counter to some of the Bible’s key prophetic traditions. Micah 6:6–8 is the clearest example of that, but there are other passages as well. While it is true that ritual sacrifice is sometimes performed as an act of appeasement, it is generally better to think of biblical sacrifice in terms of the ancient code of hospitality.

The hospitality code, as we have seen in previous lessons, governed how to deal with strangers who come into your neighborhood or region. Immigrants and travelers were cut off from their normal systems of economic support, their extended families. They were economically vulnerable. Their vulnerability made you vulnerable as well, because they might, out of desperation, steal your property and harm your family in the process. The way the ancients solved this problem of mutual vulnerability was to invite the traveler to share their table, to become temporarily a member of their household. This solution had a dual benefit: you were now morally obligated to protect the interests of the vulnerable immigrant or traveler who, in turn, was now morally obligated to protect

the interests of your family. Hospitality was a two-way street. If a stranger accepted your offer of hospitality, all was well. If the stranger rejected your offer, you probably were in trouble.

Most ritual sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament functions in the human-divine relationship like hospitality functions between human beings. God is, in many ways, the strange “other.” Encounters with God had the potential for great benefit but also carried the risk of disaster. The story of Israel’s encounter with God at Mt. Sinai (see the excerpts from Exodus 19:10–24 in the lesson below) illustrates the sense the ancients had that coming into God’s presence was a very dangerous thing to do. In this story, God tells Moses to tell the people not to come near to God, because God might “break out on them” and kill them all. Meeting God could be wonderful or disastrous. It could go either way.

Just as rules of hospitality helped people in the ancient world reduce the risk involved when strangers suddenly appear, the rules and practices of ritual sacrifice helped the people reduce the risks of coming into contact with God. At the table shared, God and people become family, friends. Just as Abraham and Sarah spread a lavish feast for the strangers at the oaks of Mamre in Genesis 18, including nice tender steaks, so too the people of Israel spread a feast of bread, wine, and choice meat before God. The ritual slaughter of animals is not the bloody appeasement of an angry God. It is slaughtering the fatted calf. It is pulling out all the stops, sparing no expense to throw a fancy feast for the potentially dangerous, potentially beneficent “other” you hope will be your ally and friend. Ritual sacrifice is an act of hospitality, keeping the friendship strong by keeping a regular dinner date with God.

But an interesting reversal occurs in the ritual feasts described in the Bible: the offering of the people to God becomes the offering of God back to the people. Deuteronomy 14:22–29 gives the most striking example of this, but throughout the Bible we are told that the sacrifice, or some portion of it, is to be consumed by the priests who bring it (Leviticus 24:5–9, for example). In the ritual act, the people’s gift to God becomes God’s gift to the people.

Several of the prophets criticize the people for conducting ritual feasts while failing to care for the vulnerable poor. In Isaiah 1:10–14 and Amos 5:21–24, for example, the prophets, speaking on God’s behalf, reject the people’s offer of hospitality. It turns out that God is above all a God of justice who has a special concern for the most vulnerable people in society. God desires justice for all and is completely uninterested in accepting hospitality from people who are so busy being religious that they fail to do whatever they can to help the vulnerable poor.

This key prophetic concern forms the backdrop of the Gospels’ accounts of Jesus “cleansing the temple” (Matthew 21:12–17; Mark 11:15–17; Luke 10:45–46; John 2:13–17). His attack on the dove-sellers and the money-changers highlights the economic dimension of his critique. Doves were the poor person’s sacrifice (Leviticus 5:7), particularly associated with rituals related to women’s reproductive health (Leviticus 12:6–8). Money changing, of course, was the essential interface between the Roman imperial economic system, with its Caesar-cult coinage, and the temple ritual system that would not allow transactions with Caesar coins. Jesus was not attacking the ritual system per se. He was condemning the social-economic injustice of the imperial system and the failure of religious and political leaders to address it.

If you are going to spread a table for God, you had better make sure you are serving a heaping helping of justice for the vulnerable poor.

Highlight any portions of the background above that you might want to read to the class.

Pray for your students as you prepare this week's lesson.

Facilitating the Lesson

As the class begins, welcome the class and engage in your usual opening exercises (taking attendance, collecting an offering, prayer concerns, other announcements, etc.).

Opening Activity

As background for the videos, read the following excerpts from Exodus 19:10–24:

“Be careful not to go up the mountain or to touch the edge of it. Any who touch the mountain shall be put to death. No hand shall touch them, but they shall be stoned or shot with arrows; whether animal or human being, they shall not live.... On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled.... Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended upon it in fire.... Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Go down and warn the people not to break through to the Lord to look; otherwise many of them will perish. Even the priests who approach the Lord must consecrate themselves or the Lord will break out against them.’ ... The Lord said to him, ‘Go down, and come up bringing Aaron with you; but do not let either the priests or the people break through to come up to the Lord; otherwise he will break out against them.’” [1]

Scripture Reflection

Read the following texts aloud as part of the discussion:

- Deuteronomy 14:22–29
- Amos 5:21–24
- Micah 6:6–8

Video Segment

Have the class watch the following videos:

- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GO7rtQnbPxQ>
- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=31NNfSjkVb8>

Discussion Questions

Invite the class to wrestle with the following:

1. Gifts and Blessing

- Can you describe a time when a gift you gave ultimately brought a blessing to you?
- What motivated you to give the gift?
- Why did it become a blessing to you?

2. Justice and Community

- What are some issues of social-economic justice that should be addressed in our community, in our nation, or in our world?
- How, if at all, is our church already addressing those issues?
- If we are not addressing them, how might we begin to address them?
- If we are not addressing them well, how might we do a better job?

3. Worship and Justice

- What are some of the ways we already connect issues of social-economic justice with our worship of God?
- Are there particular places in our regular worship where we might make those connections more clearly?
- Are there particular times during the church year that would be especially good for such a focus?
- What could we do to increase the profile of issues related to social-economic justice in our congregation, our community, our region, or our nation?

4. The Table and the World

- How might we draw a clearer connection at the communion table between our communion with the crucified and risen Christ and our calling to work for social-economic justice for all?

Closing

If you choose to break a loaf of bread together, pass the loaf and ask each person to take a piece of bread and hold it to eat at the end of the prayer.

Close with this prayer or another one you choose:

God of Sinai,
redeemer,
liberator of slaves,
defender of the vulnerable,
hope of those without hope,
fill us with your justice fire!
The earth trembles
at the sound of your footsteps,
at the sound of your people marching
toward a world renewed,
born in justice,

nurtured in the ways of peace.
Shake us up!
Prepare us to meet our God!
Lead us into your presence,
that we may lead the lost.
Feed us at your table
that we may feed the hungry.
Build us up
that we may, by your power,
build a better world.
Give us hearts of fire
for justice and peace.
O God of Sinai,
redeemer, defender, companion, friend,
you are the hope of the hopeless,
the bread of life for a hungry world!
In the name of Jesus,
our hope,
our life,
Amen.

(Eat the bread.)

This is from a set of four lessons written by Rev. Dr. Richard H. Lowery, an ordained Disciples of Christ minister, retired Hebrew Bible professor, and President Emeritus of the Disciples of Christ Historical Society. He examines stewardship from the perspective of the faith of ancient Israel. The lessons advance to touch on Second Testament themes and their connection to the faith of Israel and how these ideas have been adopted and understood by the Church.