

Redemptive Reversals and Favoritism

There is a curious and at times peculiar narrative pattern in scripture—that is, something that comes up frequently in passages spanning the entire corpus: strange reversals of common human expectations or social practices. There are a few prominent variations on this theme:

- (1) The blessing of the late born son: Isaac instead of Ishmael, Jacob instead of Esau, Joseph over his other brothers, David instead of his elder brother. In fact, the Judean royal family is derived from Jacob's fourth son, Judah, and from David and Solomon, neither of whom were their father's first born. God seems quite intent on upending perennial human practices within the family and even in political practice. ***God doesn't look at the same criteria when it comes to passing on the family blessing or promise and God doesn't emphasize the same strengths as humans when selecting a ruler or leader.***
- (2) Elijah and Elisha—bridge and model to New Covenant ministry
 - (i) 1 Kings 17—widow of Zarephath in Sidon. 1 Kings 21—Naboth's Vineyard; Elisha mirrors Elijah—2 Kings 4—poor widow/rich Shunamite/Pot with Flour miracle—Heals the socially invisible among Israel and non-Israelite,
 - (ii) 2 Kings 5—Naaman, an Amarean military man of high rank. Even he must trust and submit to the surprising power of God in the prophet, who brings ***power from outside royal channels.***
- (3) Jesus brings these redemptive reversals into another social and political context.
 - (a) First, ***consider his use of parables when teaching the people of the land and his own disciples. These parables typically subvert the "structure of expectation."***
 - (i) Matthew 20:1-16—all receive equal pay
 - (ii) Luke 15:11-32—Parable of the two brothers—both wayward.
 - (iii) Luke 10:25-37—Parable of Good Samaritan
 - (b) Jesus' ***own saying, "the last will be first and the first will be last" is a powerful eschatological claim about God's just power to, yet again, disintegrate or undo what appear to be human certainties or judgments about rank and worth***—who belongs at the first spot—and flips them on their head as well.
 - (c) TWO PROMINENT EXAMPLES
 - (i) MARK 8,9,10
 - (ii) Jesus in the Gospel of Luke is especially effective in this very mode of ***ministry at dinner parties and when delivering other teachings on hospitality.***
 - 1) ***Redemptive Social leveling:*** He lifts up the scandalous woman and demotes Simon the host (Luke 7)
 - 2) Luke 14—he encourages listeners to invite the poor, lame, and cripple instead of only those guests that uphold the honor or social

status of the host. Time and time again Jesus subverts agreed upon social practices and mores.

- (4) **1 Corinthians 1:22–31** (ESV): For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, 23 but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, 24 but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. 27 But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, 29 so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. 30 And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, 31 so that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”
- (5) **1 Corinthians 12:21–26** (ESV): The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” 22 On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, 23 and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, 24 which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, 25 that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. 26 If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.
- (6) In James, we reach the question of favoritism at one of its most prescient moments, chiefly because it includes a weighty theological claim about God’s ironic action for salvation:

James 2:1–13 (ESV): My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. 2 For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, 3 and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, “You sit here in a good place,” while you say to the poor man, “You stand over there,” or, “Sit down at my feet,” 4 have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? 5 Listen, my beloved brothers, **has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom,** which he has promised to those who love him? 6 But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? 7 Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called? 8 **If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,”** you are doing well. 9 But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. 10 For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. 11 For he who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not murder.” If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. 12 **So speak and so act** as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. 13 For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

- The 2 commandments from the 10 commandments (Exodus 20) are meant to be highlighted as of a piece with the royal law of freedom.
- If you show favoritism, you are breaking the entire law of freedom, the just teachings (*mishpatim*) of the Torah of Moses, even if you don't commit adultery or murder.
- So speak and so act: this must be fulfilled in word and deed or it is violated as a whole!
- “Beautifully dressed” and “shabby clothes”—at first, James recognizes how they are being treated ***exactly as they would in the world at large***, but James states that God is acting in the world, and showing this in the church, by *exalting the poor man* and bringing down the rich man, who is honored. This is to be a message of HOPE. In the same way, whether for poverty or race or sex, those “distinctions” as a form of exaltation or humiliation need to be undone, dismantled. LOVE OF THE ROYAL LAW.
 - If anybody is deemed less-than, God wants to lift them up.

Synthesis:

Justice as an instance of giving what is due.

- Psalm 146:7—“Happy as he who executes justice for the oppressed and who gives food to the hungry.”
- Psalm 103:6—“The Lord works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed.”
- Judah Institutionalized it's injustice through their written or publicized laws. Isaiah 10:1-2—“woe to those who decree iniquitous decrees, and the writers who keep writing oppression.”
- Amos 4,5—“Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream” (Amos 5:24)

Proverb—give to one what that person is owed. Listen to the truth of each person without favoring one or the other in terms of a personal bond or attachment. This lines up with finding out the truth of a matter.

However, justice known as *mishpat* also pertains to general living conditions—that is, to the relational and social elements of life. The Hebrew Bible often refers to *mishpat* and *tsedaqa*, terms that are often rendered “justice” and “righteousness” respectively. In the New Testament, these are often viewed in tandem because the word often translated “righteousness” in familiar NT passages is the same Greek term for “justice.” There is, in other words, a right way to live together before God. God establishes “right” standing before one another and Godself and is aware of how material conditions make it easier for one person to be tempted to manipulate, exploit, disregard, or stand against another person in the community. Why? Because in a situation where the possession of tools, land, food, clothing, and shelter may be quite precarious in the face of threat, human beings will build up strategies, tactics, and justifications to diminish threat and elevate their security. Accumulating goods and a sense of respect in these arrangements, if not monitored carefully from a covenantal perspective, generates the impression that I am of greater worth than this other person, who has fallen under hard times and is under severe duress and in need of help. ***It is this vulnerability that particularly concerns God. At this juncture, how do social relations work?*** In contrast to the biblical

injunction toward *neighborliness*, or ***neighbor-love***, we find instead ***competition***. As the scriptures testify, social patterns could encourage people to help this vulnerable person while keeping them dependent on the helper by using dishonest scales, heavy interest, and other situations. Those with goods are viewed with greater favor than others.

Justice is an instance of making right an arrangement or living condition that does not respect the dignity, the potential—or to put it in more biblical terms—the *calling* of the human being as the image and child of God.

If favoritism as a term names to give advantage or favor to one person over against another, then, if viewed more widely as a consistent social practice, amounts to injustice.

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