

God's Justice Includes Work and Economic Justice

From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on Amos Chapters 7-8 and Micah Chapters 6-7

Justice in work is not only an individual matter. People have a responsibility to make sure that everyone in society has access to the resources needed to make a living. Amos criticizes Israel for injustice in this respect, most vividly in an allusion to the law of gleaning. Gleaning is the process of picking up the stray heads of grain that remain in a field after the harvesters have passed through. According to God's covenant with Israel, farmers were not allowed to glean their own fields, but were to allow poor people (literally "widows and orphans") to glean them as a way of supporting themselves. This created a rudimentary form of social welfare, based on creating an opportunity for the poor to work rather than having to beg, steal or starve. Gleaning is a way to participate in the dignity of work, even for those who are unable to participate in the labor market due to lack of resources, socio-economic dislocation, discrimination, disability, or other factors. God not only wants everyone's needs to be met, he wants to offer everyone the dignity of working to meet their needs and the needs of others.

Amos complains that this provision is being violated. Farmers are not leaving the stray grain in their fields for the poor to glean. Instead they offer to sell chaff—the waste left after threshing—to the poor at a ruinous price. "You trample on the needy, and bring ruin to the poor," Amos accuses them, "...selling the sweepings of the wheat" (Amos 8:4, 6). Amos accuses them of waiting restlessly for the end of the Sabbath so they can carry on selling this cheap, adulterated food product to those who have no other choice. Moreover, they are cheating even those who can afford to buy pure grain, as is evident in rigged balances in the marketplace. Micah proclaims God's judgment against unjust commerce. "Can I tolerate wicked scales and a bag of dishonest weights?" says the Lord (Micah 6:11). This tells us clearly that justice is not only a matter of criminal law and political expression, but also of economic opportunity. The opportunity to work to meet individual and family needs is essential to the role of the individual within the covenant. Economic justice is an essential component of Micah's famous, ringing proclamation only 3 verses earlier, "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8). God requires his people—as a daily matter of their walk with him—to love kindness and do justice individually and socially, in every aspect of work and economic life.