



*God of Justice: The IJM Institute
Global Church Curriculum*
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A Spotlight on the Core of God's Heart: Loosen the Chains of Injustice

While pointing out the reason God was not responding to the prayer and fasting of the people, the prophet Isaiah also names the very essence of what God really requires:

Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:
to loose the chains of injustice
and untie the cords of the yoke,
to set the oppressed free
and break every yoke?

Is it not to share your food with the hungry
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter —
when you see the naked, to clothe them,
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? (Isaiah 58:6-7)

In this passage, the prophet highlights the religious practice of fasting and redefines it in rather non-religious term. It is not about the foods one can eat but rather the actions taken on behalf of and in connection with the marginalized. All of Isaiah 58 shows a connection between worship of God and acts of justice on behalf of the most vulnerable. The nation of Israel is challenged to see that their relationship with others, particularly those who have been cast aside in their community, affects their relationship with God.

This is indeed the mandate that we, as Christ-followers, have been given: to loose the chains of injustice, to untie the yoke, to set the oppressed free, to break every yoke, to share food, to provide shelter, to clothe the naked and not turn from our own flesh and blood! This is what God requires from his people. In the verses immediately preceding these, the prophet emphasizes that it is not even prayer and fasting or sackcloth and ashes that God requires, but instead that we free those who are abused.

International Justice Mission (IJM), a human rights organization of Christian lawyers, social workers, investigators, advocates and educators, began its work in 1997. IJM began by taking seriously these words in Isaiah. And so the organization started to actively work to “loose the chains of injustice” for people caught in human trafficking, forced labor and other forms of violent injustice.

Since its beginning, IJM recognized that the church is a key part of God's work of justice. As IJM joined in a growing justice movement, we experienced some concern. Does this justice movement have the roots — the biblical grounding — to maintain a long-term, sustained engagement with these hard issues?

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BOOK EXCERPT

In 2010, IJM began helping churches in the Global South fight injustice in their communities. We quickly realized our mission was not going to be as easy as we had initially expected. The church in so many places was far from embracing the prophet's definition of true religion.

Exploring the biblical narrative of justice throughout Scripture, this twelve-session curriculum from International Justice Mission will help you and your church bring freedom and reconciliation to those in need. Prepare to have your heart and mind engaged, to be instructed by Scripture and to be mobilized as the hands and feet of Jesus.

As we worked in the Global South and elsewhere, we noticed a pattern for why churches did not easily embrace the prophet's description of true religion. First, there was either a significant lack of awareness of the injustices in their communities, or there was just a lack of awareness of adequate responses to these injustices. We thought this was best addressed through awareness-creating efforts. However, the second reason was a little more disconcerting to us. Just as in the passage from Isaiah, churches seemed to put more emphasis on certain religious observances, rituals and traditions, instead of allowing "justice [to] roll on like a river" (Amos 5:24). Centuries of theological formulations and traditions had formed a thick cover on what was the essential kernel of God's mandate – at least in terms of the church's roles and responsibilities in this world – that needed to be peeled off. A spotlight needed to be shined on the core of God's heart.

This Bible study is our attempt to peel back those layers of traditions and skewed theologies and put the spotlight back on a core essential. It is also our attempt to deepen the roots of justice into its strong biblical foundation. We felt the need to journey with churches around the world and grapple with the ultimate divine plan to set things right – *shalom*.

– Taken from the Introduction