

Sample Sermon

*“He has shown you what is good. And what does the Lord require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”* Micah 6:8

This year’s theme for National Crime Victims’ Rights Week is “Victims’ Rights: Right for America.” Considering this theme in the light of the text, there are two facets of victims’ rights that emerge. These are the right to justice (“*act justly*”) and the right to compassionate ministry (“*love mercy*”).

Regarding the right to justice, crime victim advocates and other criminal justice professionals have long envisioned and worked toward a goal of “equal justice” for victims of crime. We are all familiar with one of our most cherished symbols of justice -- Lady Justice holding equally balanced scales of justice. But for too many years, these scales have not been balanced, but rather tipped in favor of the accused. The rationale and intent of this legal protection of the accused is right and appropriate. Individuals in our society who stand accused of crimes are accorded a series of constitutional protections to ensure that every effort is made to avoid false accusations and penalization of innocent parties. We are all familiar with the well-known Miranda rights: *You have the right to remain silent . . . You have the right to an attorney . . . If you cannot afford one, an attorney will be provided for you.* Legal protection, through our criminal justice process, is necessary and right for those accused of crimes. What is not right is the lack of such legal rights for those *victimized* by the same crimes.

Many efforts are being made in our country to address the current imbalance in our criminal and juvenile justice systems. Victims’ rights constitutional amendments have passed in a total of twenty-nine states, [including here in (your state, if applicable)]. A proposed federal constitutional amendment for victims’ rights is currently pending in Congress, with bi-partisan support. Victims and victim advocates look forward to a day when their rights will be as established and secure as those of offenders: *You have the right to accurate and reliable information about your case . . . You have the right to notice of legal proceedings involving your case . . . You have the right to provide input regarding the harms you have suffered . . . You have the right to restitution.* In many states, there are victims who still do not have these basic rights. So the prophet Micah’s declaration that the Lord requires of us to “*act justly*” must certainly include efforts on the part of God’s people to balance the scales of justice to include rights for innocent victims of crime.

Another right for crime victims in light of the above passage, which can be provided by God's people is the right to compassionate ministry. The Hebrew prophet, Isaiah, indicates that among the works of "*the Spirit of the Lord*" "*bind up the brokenhearted*" and "*to comfort all who mourn*" (Isaiah 61:1, 2). Surprisingly, even though this great Hebrew passage is also reiterated in the Christian gospels, with Jesus referring this activity to himself (Luke 4:18, 19), God's people have historically provided compassionate ministry to offenders while often forgetting that crime victims have an equally compelling need for services and ministry. It seems that somehow our response to the lesson provided with Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10) has been overshadowed by our response to His injunctions to visit those in prison (Matthew 25:36). Traditionally, the church has had jail and prison ministries, but very few ministries to crime victims.

Recently, a two-day theological forum was sponsored by the victim-serving arm of a large national prison ministry. Toward the end of the first day, one of the victim advocates finally spoke up, calling to our attention that the theological presentations and discussions had been dominated by concerns of ministry to offenders. It took a definite wrenching and reversal of thought on the part of the theologians present to begin to emphasize ministry to victims, even though this forum was sponsored as a forum on the theology of victimization. It is sometimes difficult, but quite necessary, for us to realize that the current imbalances that exist between offenders and victims in our criminal and juvenile justice systems are often mirrored in our own ministries to offenders and victims.

Ministry to the crime victim requires education in sensitivity. Pat answers often do nothing to help, and may even alienate, the victim. It has been said that the account in the Hebrew scriptures of the ministry to Job (the victim of significant and numerous crimes) by Job's friends was very effective, until they began to talk. We read, "*They sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was.*" (Job 2:13). But when they did begin to talk to Job, they said all the wrong things. One example is this terrible victim ministry statement by Eliphaz the Temanite, "*Who being innocent, has ever perished? Where were the upright ever destroyed? As I have observed, those who plow evil and those who sow trouble reap it.*" (Job 4:8). Thankfully, at the end of this remarkable book, God himself challenges this bad advice and lack of victim assistance. These are the beginning words of His response, "*Then the Lord answered Job out of the storm. He said, 'Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge?'*" (Job 38:1ff).

We who minister to crime victims would do well to sometimes sit in silence with the suffering victim, when silence is needed. When we speak, it must be with words of compassion and understanding that convey our genuine acknowledgement that crime victims are not to blame for what happened to them. Crime victims desperately need our private and public support for the reality that, just as ministry to offenders must be balanced with ministry to victims, so too,

justice for offenders must be balanced with justice for victims. It is true that offenders need our support in acknowledging and repairing the harm they have caused and in changing their lives and their hearts. But victims are essential to this process -- they should be at the *center* of this process -- and we can do much to support them. We can start with the clear message to crime victims that it is, indeed, God's will that we all "*act justly*" and that true justice includes justice for victims of crime. We can feel compassion for all parties to a crime, but let us remember that true justice can never flourish without the involvement of and ministry to those innocent individuals who have been victimized by crime. With compassionate ministry, we must all do our part in carrying out the message conveyed in the exhortation to "*act justly*" -- and we must do everything within our power to bring about true and balanced justice for victims of crime.