

Be a Servant at Work

From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on Isaiah

Where righteousness in Isaiah 1-39 is a term used to reveal Judah's shortcomings and infidelity, the Hebrew *mishpat* in Isaiah 40-55 is understood primarily as a gift from God that he accomplishes on behalf of his people. Isaiah himself serves as the prime example of the servant of God who brings this gift of God.

Justice or judgment is established in Isaiah 40-55 by the enigmatic "servant" embedded within this portion of Isaiah's witness. Isaiah 42:1-4, the first of the so-called servant songs, speaks of the servant as one who establishes justice in the earth. Here, in the figure of the servant, God answers Judah's cry for justice: "My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right (*mishpat*) is disregarded by my God." (Isaiah 40:27) God's own divine initiative is now enacted to accomplish for his people what they could not accomplish for themselves. The means by which God will accomplish salvation both for Israel and for the nations is in this developing figure of God's servant. Righteousness and justice are accomplished by the servant.

The servant's narrative identity develops within these chapters - from Israel per se in chapters 40-48, to an individual figure in chapters 49-53 who takes

on his own shoulders Israel's missional identity for both herself and for the nations.

“The Lord said to me: You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.” (Isaiah 49:3)

The reason for this shift from national Israel to a figure who is Israel incarnate (or an idealized Israel) is Israel's failure to fulfill her mission because of her sin. What one observes in this servant figure is the unique means by which God communicates his gracious presence and restorative intentions to his wayward people. It is by the figure of the servant that righteousness (now understood as covenant fidelity to his people) is offered to them as a gift on the basis of God's own freedom and sovereign commitment to his promises. Righteousness is something to be received rather than attained.

This prompts us to ask about our own roles. As members of a people being redeemed by God's grace, we can be vessels of that grace for the benefit of those around us. Sometimes we have the opportunity to make our workplaces more just, more compassionate, more oriented toward making the world a better place. In doing so, we may enact the servant's mission in small ways ourselves.

Conversely, at other times, it is difficult to do our work as God intends. Individuals or systems in our workplaces may resist the way God is leading us. Our own sin and shortcomings may short-circuit any good we might have accomplished. Even our best efforts may not seem to make much difference.

In these cases, Isaiah has a word of reassurance for us.

“I said: I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my cause is with the LORD, and my reward with my God.” (Isaiah 49:4)

Despite the discouragement we often feel, the ultimate result of our work is in God’s hands. We can trust God not only to use what we have done, but in God’s time to bring it to fulfillment. As Philippians puts it, “The one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Christ.” (Philippians 1:6). 1 Corinthians adds “Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.” (1 Corinthians 15:58).

The two portraits of righteousness presented in Isaiah chapters 1-39 and chapters 40-55 are pursued to give us a nuanced understanding of righteousness in Isaiah chapters 56-66. It is in this portion of Isaiah that some of the clearer portraits of a theology of work are offered. The

righteousness offered as a gift in Isaiah chapters 40-55 is now an obligation to be performed in chapters 56-66: “Thus says the Lord: ‘Maintain justice, and do what is right, for my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed’” (Isaiah 56:1).

The appeal to maintain justice and do righteousness in Isaiah chapters 56-66 is a realized possibility now for the people of God because of God’s prior gracious claim on them in the figure of the servant. The language of Isaiah 56:1 is linked to Isaiah 51:4-8 in which again Judah is called to pursue justice and righteousness. In this passage, the created possibility for the people of God to do righteousness is found in the last clauses of Isaiah 51:6 and 8: God’s righteousness and God’s salvation will not fail but will last forever. As chapters 40-55 move in their literary shape, we see God’s righteousness and salvation enacted in the person of the servant who suffers on behalf of and in place of others. The appeals to doing righteousness in chapters 56-66 are made possible because of God’s prior dealings with Israel’s infidelity in the gracious and substitutionary action of the servant. In theological language, God’s grace precedes law, as demonstrated by God’s gracious initiative to redeem his people at all costs. This is the only means by which talk of human responsibility or righteous actions can occur. It is in the security of the forgiveness of God found in Jesus Christ that the impetus for good works materializes.

The prophet turns the argument from the negative to the positive by presenting “the fast that I [God] choose” (Isaiah 58:6). This fast includes: Loosing the chains of injustice, setting the oppressed free, sharing food with the hungry, providing the poor wanderer with shelter, clothing the naked, and caring for one’s family. The result is that we participate in God's work of restoration, as described in Isaiah, "Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in." (Isaiah 58:2). Isaiah paints a picture of the values that must characterize the people of God, in stark contrast to those of most surrounding cultures. External religion or religious performance that can co-mingle with a work ethic characterized by a lack of concern for one’s laborers (where laborers or employees or subordinates are mere instruments for personal or business development), or by a leadership style that is given to strife, quarreling, backbiting, shortened fuses and uncontrolled anger — these breach our loyalty to God. A claim is made on the people of God because of the prior forgiveness of our sins in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The promise following on the heels of the invective in chapter 58 is the breaking forth of all of God’s promises in the midst of God’s people: “Your light will break forth.... your vindicator will go before you.... the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard” (Isaiah 58:8-9).

As we trace the development of “the Servant” from national Israel to an idealized Israel, then to the Servant of the Lord in chapters 52-53, then to

the servants of that Servant, we pause to reflect on the workplace implications of the model of servanthood we see in Jesus Christ. Isaiah carefully constructs his description of the servant to make it clear that he is a reflection of God himself. Therefore, Christians have traditionally equated the Servant with Jesus. Isaiah's picture of the Servant's suffering in chapters 52-53 reminds us that as servants of God, we may be called to self-sacrifice in our work, as Jesus was.

“So marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of mortals....He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account....But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed....Yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent.” (Isaiah 52:14, and 53:3, 5, and 7).

An adequate vision of God will motivate us to make God's standard our standard, so that we do not allow self-interest and self-aggrandizement to pervert our work.

Jesus, in his death and resurrection, met a need we could not meet. God's standard calls us to meet the needs of justice and righteousness through

our work: “Justice is turned back, and righteousness stands at a distance; for truth stumbles in the public square, and uprightness cannot enter. Truth is lacking, and whoever turns from evil is despoiled. The Lord saw it, and it displeased him that there was no justice. He saw that there was no one, and was appalled that there was no one to intervene; so his own arm brought him victory, and his righteousness upheld him” (Isaiah 59:14-16). As servants of the Servant of the Lord, we are called to meet unmet needs. In the workplace, this may have many faces: concern for a downtrodden employee or co-worker, alertness to the integrity of a product being sold to consumers, eschewing process shortcuts that would deprive people of their input, even rejecting hoarding in times of scarcity. As Paul wrote to the Galatians, “Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2).

As servants of the Servant of the Lord, we may not receive the acclaim we desire. Rewards may be deferred. But we know that God is our Judge. Isaiah put it this way in chapter 57:15: “For thus says the high and lofty one who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with those who are contrite and humble in spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite.”