



Truth to Power series



Five Videos and Additional Study Resources for Group and Individual Use

2/5 JUSTICE AND PRISON REFORM



Welcome



Welcome to The Truth to Power Series, five videos and accompanying resources especially commissioned and produced by and for members of Christians on the Left.

Throughout the series you can see the influence of members of Christians on the Left who are just like you; members who are councillors, committee members, teachers, retail workers, nurses, parents, business owners, fundraisers, administrators and church leaders. Each member brings their own perspective and we hope they inspire you to ask more and better questions as we grapple with some big topics and policies.

A great many people invested their valuable time in this project, so on behalf of the Executive Committee and Truth to Power team, thank you all for contributing.

We hope you find this new resource a valuable tool and can benefit from it alongside your friends and colleagues.



Shona Elliott - Vice Chair, CotL
Truth to Power Project Leader



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USING 'TRUTH TO POWER'

This is the second in a series of five studies:

Housing and Homelessness
Justice and Prison Reform
Refugees Welcome?
Economics and the 99%
Love not War

Each study features a 10-15 minute video, which can be watched in sections to aid reflection and conversation.

This PDF resource includes thought-provoking questions about the video content and additional resources for group leaders.

We recommend reading some of the content beforehand, then beginning with a prayer or praise before watching the video together, then using some of the questions from the red sections to inspire discussion and prayer.

The red sections are also available as a separate participants guide, for handy printing and reference.



“

**What does the LORD
require of you? To act
justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with
your God.**

MICAH 6v8 (NIV)



"As a Christian I believe I should care about issues of justice and peace in our world and I should try and do something about it where I can. But I do that because I believe in God, not because of a political bent. I don't think I am politically minded because hopefully I am God minded."

But is this Christian misguided?

Shona writes: This was an actual email I was sent from a faithful Christian after they had read an article I had written. **It cut me to the core** because it made me desperately sad that someone who had grown up in the church believed that their faith had nothing to say about politics, and therefore potentially the whole world around them.

Politics was simply not a God issue for them.

Our Christian faith is our starting point and naturally informs our understanding of justice, but to engage in issues of injustice is to actually model our faith authentically. A holistic understanding of the Kingdom of God develops into a response to human need (Psalm 82v2-4) for we have been enlisted in the joyous task of enabling God's kingdom to come in all areas of life. It is God's gift but our task; we work for it, even as we wait for it. It is not a self-righteous theology but a humble recognition of God's wisdom and active love already present in the world.

Christians are called to be a very part of God's story to restore, redeem and reconcile all of creation. What an awe inspiring call on our lives!

Christians on the Left stands firmly in a tradition which has always proposed that the gospel should be lived out in the political and economic structures of society. This short course has been put together to help you reflect on policy and political issues from a theological and biblical perspective, to excite you to discover what God might have to say about the pressing issues of our day.

CHRISTIANS ARE CALLED TO
BE A CENTRAL PART OF
GOD'S RESTORATION STORY.
WHAT AN AWE-INSPIRING
CALL ON OUR LIVES!

Truth to Power strives to help you chart this journey with friends, to **prayerfully wrestle** with the questions it will inevitably raise but to help us avoid dualistic thinking, where God has little to say about the material world. In ancient Hebrew, there was no distinct word for "spiritual" - a hint that we could be in danger of creating an unhelpful secular/spiritual divide in our thinking.



WHY NOT PRAY INTO EACH QUESTION BEFORE YOU ASK IT?

The accompanying videos share the thoughts of some of our members on different policy areas. We have chosen to look at subjects such as housing and finance to ensure this is more than just an academic exercise over a coffee but a start of a deep conversation about bringing God's truth to bear upon politics. Is rehabilitation more important than punishment? Is housing a public good? Should states have a nuclear arsenal?

Truth to Power is about helping us reflect upon how we can apply biblical and theological truths to fundamental questions about how we should structure society and govern well, and to suggest this should form part of our understanding of what it means to be a disciple of Christ.

FOR THE FOOLISHNESS OF GOD IS WISER THAN MEN (1COR 1:25)

More importantly, I hope and pray this course could be a way for you to join us as we seek to provide support, resource and fellowship for those who are engaging politically.

It may well encourage you to share truth to power or perhaps to go and be the truth, modelling the Kingdom of God within the political realm. Politics is indeed holy ground, where God is calling faithful men and women to serve.

As John Newton wrote to William Wilberforce in July 1796 :

"You have the [far greater] honor of being a Representative for the Lord, in a place where many know him not, and an opportunity of showing them what are the genuine fruits of that religion which you are known to profess."



**Remember those in
prison, as if you were
there yourself.**

HEBREWS 13v3 (NLT)



Behind Closed Doors

"THE WHOLE TROUBLE IS THAT PEOPLE THINK THERE ARE CIRCUMSTANCES WHEN ONE MAY DEAL WITH HUMAN BEINGS WITHOUT LOVE, BUT NO SUCH CIRCUMSTANCES EVER EXIST. HUMAN BEINGS CANNOT BE HANDLED WITHOUT LOVE. IT CANNOT BE OTHERWISE, BECAUSE MUTUAL LOVE IS THE FUNDAMENTAL LAW OF HUMAN LIFE."

LEO TOLSTOY





For he breaks down gates of bronze and cuts through bars of iron.

Prison policy is one of those areas we can quite easily ignore as for the majority of us, it can feel like it has no direct impact. How many of us have served time in prison, or know someone who has, or have ever visited a prison? Not many. I do not think, therefore, it was simply a turn of phrase when the apostle wrote, "Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison" Hebrews 13v3 (NIV). Do we think of those in prison as our neighbours? Does the current system in the UK regard those who have committed crimes as equal citizens, worthy of proper treatment? Are we thinking about what it might be like to live as a person in prison or are we content to stand outside the gates?

The Bible makes several references to different prisons, from Joseph's imprisonment in Genesis to Satan's in Revelation.

PSALM 107v16 (NIV)

However, scripture speaks relatively little about actual verdicts of crime and punishment, rather it presents a narrative of life-giving justice and redemption.

Scripture does clearly outline the consequences of sin, both personal and structural, and its devastating impact on communities, the vulnerable and even entire nations (Amos 2v6-16). The judgement here can even appear brutal, but it makes it all the more remarkable that God's mercy remains unilateral and his compassion takes precedence over his wrath. Even though the offences of Israel were against the very laws of God, he continued to lavish immeasurable love upon them and when "they cried to the Lord in their trouble... he saved them from their distress... And broke away their chains... for he breaks down gates of bronze and cuts through bars of iron." Psalm 107v13-16 (NIV).



I WILL BETROTH YOU TO ME FOREVER; I WILL
BETROTH YOU IN RIGHTEOUSNESS AND JUSTICE,
IN LOVE AND COMPASSION. HOSEA 2:19 (NIV)



Words of judgement and justice expressed in the Old Testament are often in response to the unfaithfulness of Israel. God's punishment declared through the prophets, however, is redemptive in nature: it is borne out of covenantal love, not a legal concept of religious retribution. Justice brings life as God's justice is corrective and relationship-seeking rather than punitive.

It also demands that his concern for the weak is expressed in the functions of the community (Amos 5v21-24). The apostle Paul goes on to write that the work of God to save his enemies is also an expression of justice (Romans 3v21) as the ultimate goal of God's justice is redemption (Amos 9v11-15). "The justice of God is saving power. God's fidelity to the role as the Lord of the covenant."^[1]



God's justice sets out to heal; it is redemptive. Jesus himself said he did not come to minister to those who are well but to those who need healing (Mark 2v17). Jesus turned the concept of a Jewish Messiah on its head by rejecting the idea that injustice must be fought with violence and coercion. He entered into relationship and broke bread with sinners, whilst still acknowledging their sin. Unlike the Pharisees who lived to punish wrongdoers and ultimately found Jesus himself guilty of blasphemy against God, the Son of God showed that true justice is to seek healing and transformation in the midst of a sinful world. It is a restoration of wholeness.

WHAT IS JUSTICE?

God destroys evil, ultimately not through coercive force but through sacrificial suffering love on the cross. And the amazing truth of the gospel is that even though we are all lawbreakers (with the Bible being chiefly authored by arguably three of the worst - Moses, David and Paul) we are reconciled to God through Christ Jesus our Lord.





Bible in Focus

Read Luke 15 v11-32

- 1) Is the perspective of the parable helpful when considering criminal justice?
- 2) How did the father ensure his son was not treated as a second-class citizen or as hired help on his return? What is the significance of the robe, ring and shoes?
- 3) The Father reestablished his son into the household through a full restoration of his privileges. How might we support those who have been through the prison system to reintegrate into society and fully participate in the community?
- 4) How central is relationship to justice? Is the restoring of dialogue and enabling reconciliation between the offender and the victim a healthy approach?



5) Is the Father's rejoicing predicated on his son's repentance and choice to return? What role should repentance play in a justice setting? How far did the Father expect the son to come until he came a major part of the way to meet him?

6) Are we guilty of righteous indignation such as the other son displays, believing a criminal's place is among the swine? Is it unjust that someone who squandered his father's money on prostitutes is simply forgiven?

7) Having a feast thrown in one's honour is a blessing, but is it more of a gift to be invited to host the banquet with the father? How can we participate missionally in God's plan of redemption?

8) What is the relevance of Jesus sharing this parable after the Pharisees accused him of associating with sinners? Whom are you associating with?





Prisons Today



So, what does justice look like for the offender? By both those working in the system and even in Westminster, it is widely acknowledged that our prisons are in crisis [2]. In 2017, there were 295 deaths in custody, a record high of 42,837 self-harm incidents and 28,165 assaults including almost 8000 of those on prison staff [3].

The UK is the top incarcerator in Europe, yet 2 in 5 jails are deemed unsafe and inadequate provisions prevail in over two thirds [4]. The scale of the crisis is engulfing the system's ability to protect and serve prisoners and staff alike. Almost half of those in prison (47%) are offered insufficient or poor access to meaningful activities [5] and is it, therefore, unsurprising that 44% of adults are reconvicted within a year of release - increasing to 59% for those serving sentences less than a year [6]. There are of course many complex interrelating problems that plague those within the criminal justice system.



Combined with reducing staff numbers, a seemingly intractable drugs problem, particularly with “legal highs” (also known as “new psychoactive substances” sold under names such as “Spice”) has embedded itself into prison life, with unpredictable and occasionally lethal consequences. “Justice” surely cannot be exposing those who live and work in prison to this level of danger.

Mental health is another complex area that deserves its own analysis and should be carefully considered when analysing the justice system in a holistic fashion.



“LISTEN TO ME, MY PEOPLE; HEAR ME, MY NATION: INSTRUCTION WILL GO OUT FROM ME; MY JUSTICE WILL BECOME A LIGHT TO THE NATIONS. MY RIGHTEOUSNESS DRAWS NEAR SPEEDILY, MY SALVATION IS ON THE WAY, AND MY ARM WILL BRING JUSTICE TO THE NATIONS.”

ISAIAH 51:4-5 (NIV)



**"The degree of
civilisation in a
society is revealed
by entering its
prisons."**

FYODOR DOSTOYEVSKY



So: the factors behind the current landscape are complex and many.

However, at the heart of it is numbers. Just a quarter of a century ago in 1991, the prison population in England and Wales stood at just under 45000, it now stands at nearer 85,000 – a 90% increase, at a time when crime rates have decreased [7].

There has been nothing like the same rise in Scotland, where prison numbers are currently at their lowest for a decade following the devolution of justice powers to Holyrood. Below the border, successive Governments have entered a sentencing arms race and the infrastructure and staff numbers have not kept up with the increasing prison population.

In fact, whilst there was a plan to recruit an extra 2500 prison officers at the end of 2016, the measure only partially made up for the 30% cut in staff numbers since 2010 [8].





Injustice, Injustice

Those who find themselves in the criminal justice system almost all have personal stories of profound injustice and hardship.

As James Gilligan, the former head psychiatrist for the Massachusetts Department of Corrections writes, many offences emerge out of injustice and victimization that offenders themselves have experienced [9].

For example, official statistics state that over half of women in UK prisons (53%) have experienced physical or emotional abuse when younger, with charities who work with women reporting a rate of 80%. Fewer than 1% of the child population in England are in care but they make up 37% of those in young offender institutions and 24% of the overall adult prison population have been in care at some stage [10].



When we know someone takes their own life in prison every three days [11], what are we doing about it?

Bob Neill MP, the Conservative Chair of the Justice Select Committee (2018) acknowledges the extent of the crisis and has been quoted [12] saying:

“WE REALLY NEED TO HAVE
A SERIOUS CONVERSATION
ABOUT WHAT WE USE
PRISON FOR.

SOCIETY HAS TO THINK
ABOUT THAT.”

As Christians do we need to be asking is there another way prisons should operate?

What should the focus of our response to criminal activity be?

How are we aiming to restore relationships through mechanisms of justice?





Further Discussion

- 1) Is justice a key characteristic of God?
What does it mean to be fully restored?

- 2) Do you believe justice brings life to communities?
What is the importance of justice to the health of society?

- 3) What social dynamics can we challenge that breed injustice and often lead to an escalation of criminal or destructive behaviour?

- 4) What new biblical perspective can we bring to bear on the criminal justice system?

- 5) Is there truth in Nelson Mandela's statement that no one truly knows a nation until one has been inside its jails?
 - A) Read the Prison Reform Trust Guide *What Can I do* and discuss together how you might choose to get involved in the criminal justice system [13].

 - B) When you pray for your local community and neighbours, does this include those in prison either in a local institution or those missing from families?

 - C) How can we care for those with lived experience of the justice system in the church?





6) What is prison for?

7) Do you know where the closest prison is to you? What category prison is it? How many people are living in the jail?

8) Should privatized provision play a role in the prison service?

9) Should greater emphasis be placed on offender rehabilitation?

10) What do you believe is behind the increase of prisoners in English and Welsh prisons?

11) Is there value in a system of criminal justice which focuses on the rehabilitation of offenders through reconciliation with victims and the community at large?

12) How can we help repair the harm caused by crime?

13) What services would you make available to prisoners while serving their sentences?

14) Are you in a position to consider offering those with lived experience of prison employment, given ex-offenders with a job are 20% less likely to re-offend [14].



Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. (NIV)

The faithful love of the LORD never ends! His mercies never cease. (NLT)

The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; (ESV)

The LORD'S lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, For His compassions never fail. (NASB)

It is of the LORD'S mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. (KJV)

Because of the LORD's faithful love we do not perish, for his mercies never end. (CSB)



Credits and References

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A simply huge thanks to CotL Members Matt Wilson, Shona Elliott and Daniel May-Miller for pulling this all together. Daniel runs our Office and Communications day-to-day, Shona is one of our two busy Vice-Chairs and Matt runs Goodlabs, as well as shooting video in his spare time.

Visit www.goodlabs.uk to find out more.



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CHRISTIANS ON THE LEFT.



The Truth to Power Series has been especially commissioned and produced by and for members of Christians on the Left.

Bringing biblical perspectives, key thinking from members of Christians on the Left and the Executive Committee, alongside thought provoking questions and additional resources for group leaders, the videos can be used at home, with friends or colleagues, at an event or individually to inspire further study around five key topics:

Housing and Homelessness
Justice and Prison Reform
Refugees Welcome?
Economics and the 99%
Love not War

The series focuses on how our faith should guide the principles underpinning government policy, preparing us to speak the Truth to those with Power. This will look different to each member of Christians on the Left, as we live out the calling God has for our lives.

Visit our website for the complete series and additional resources:

christiansontheleft.org.uk/truth_to_power_series



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