

Covenant Resource Paper

The Evangelical Covenant Church and The Ministry of Compassion, Mercy, and Justice

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

Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of
these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.
Matthew 25:40

INTRODUCTION

In Luke 4:18-19 Jesus boldly announced his mission: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Jesus announced good news for the whole world, with particular attention to the poor, the captive, the incapacitated, and the oppressed. Jesus persistently allied himself with untouchables as well as the voiceless. In both word and deed, he attacked discrimination against lepers, Gentiles, Samaritans, tax collectors, shepherds, women, and children. In the parable of Lazarus and the rich man, Jesus condemned those who showed the poor neither compassion nor mercy (Luke 16:19-31). When the disciples of John the Baptist asked Jesus if he was the expected Messiah, he replied, “Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor” (Luke 7:22). Compassion, mercy, and justice are at the heart of the mission of God the Father, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and incarnated in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

As a community of faith centered on and actively engaged with the Bible, the Evangelical Covenant Church has a long and significant history of ministries of compassion, mercy, and justice. In recent years our engagement in these ministries has increased, deepened, and broadened. This focus reflects our deepening conviction that to be faithful to the Bible, the Covenant Church must work to live out the great commandment in all its ramifications. When asked by a teacher of the law, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?” Jesus answered, “The most important one...is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:28-31). Along with Luke 4:18-19, this text provides clarity about the foundation for ministries of compassion, mercy, and justice and intimately links love for God with love for neighbor. This perspective, reflecting the historic foundations and character of the Covenant, is inscribed succinctly in stone at the base of the first building erected at North Park University: “For God and Humanity.”

Linking love for God with love for neighbor, Henry Palmblad, known to his peers as the city missionary, proposed to the second Covenant Annual Meeting in 1886 the establishment of a home of mercy on the North Side of Chicago. An approving vote led to the purchase of a three-story building on Foster Avenue

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that served the sick on one floor, orphaned children on another, and the elderly on yet another. Through ministries of compassion, mercy, and justice, generation upon generation of Covenant men and women have followed the example of Jesus in announcing the good news of the kingdom of God in word and deed. This is how the church participates in the ongoing work and mission of Jesus Christ in the world.

This participation in the mission of Jesus Christ is meaningful, however, only to the extent to which we understand the reality of sin. Human sin is at the root of the brokenness in the world. By their very nature, ministries of compassion, mercy, and justice seek to address sin in the world. The effects of sin are complex and pervasive and culminate in the suffering of Jesus on the cross as he took upon himself the sins of the world. In addressing God's call to compassion, mercy, and justice we recognize our own sinfulness and the sin of the world with deep grief and humility. Our work, flawed as it is, is founded on God's work, the redemption, reconciliation, and restoration of God in Christ. The Christ event—the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—is the decisive act of compassion, mercy, and justice in our world.

The purpose of this paper is to articulate our understanding of the biblical call to ministries of compassion, mercy, and justice. As a Covenant Resource Paper this document is the result of a process of communal discernment of the whole of the Covenant Church.

TOWARD UNDERSTANDING COMPASSION, MERCY, AND JUSTICE

Compassion, mercy, and justice—all three express essential characteristics of God's nature and God's call to us. God's heart is clearly revealed in the words of Jesus: "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me" (Matthew 25:35-36). This passage gives expression to our call to be engaged in ministries of compassion, mercy, and justice. Likewise, Micah 6:8 succinctly states what God requires of us: "to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." And a prayer in the following chapter speaks directly of the compassion of God, linking it to God's forgiveness: "You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea" (7:19).

As we explore the Bible, we find that compassion, mercy, and justice are inseparable. Their meanings are woven together, belong together, and illuminate each other. One without the others truncates and limits the work of God in our world. They should be viewed as a unified whole.

With these texts and this perspective in mind, we believe:

Compassion is identifying with and joining in the suffering of others. When we are compassionate we incarnate the heart of God, carrying God's love into action for all people, especially for those who are poor, oppressed, and marginalized. Compassion is a call to sacrificial love for others in the name of Jesus. In compassion we ask, "Where is the brokenness in our world? What is our obedient response to that brokenness?"

Mercy is extending God's unconditional love. Mercy is our recognition of God's grace given to us while we were yet sinners. Mercy is expressed as we extend compassion, forgiveness, and care to others as

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God extends mercy to us, undeserved and without limits. Mercy is seeing ourselves in the brokenness of others, and leads us to a compassionate and just response. In mercy we ask, “Who is broken? Who is in need? Who is my neighbor?”

Justice is joining God in making things right. Justice is the work of God confronting and overcoming evil and sin, both individually and systemically in our world. The people of God are commanded to join God in this work, restoring God’s righteous purpose and *shalom* for creation and the human family. For the follower of Christ, injustice is not an abstraction but a reality that we must identify, name, and intentionally address. In justice we ask, “Why does this brokenness exist? How do we address the causes?”

Our understandings of compassion, mercy, and justice are rooted in Scripture rather than in secular debate in which complex issues often become mired in toxic and self-serving polarizations. Scripture calls us to seek constructive solutions. Compassion, mercy, and justice ministry is not a matter of retribution; nor does it mean that those who run afoul of the laws of humanity or of God should escape judgment. It is not equivalent with judicial justice in society.

THE IMAGE OF GOD

The Bible states in Genesis 1:31 that God is pleased with creation, declaring it to be good. This means that all people bear the full image of God in their very being—people from every race, tribe, language, and nation; people from every religion and ideology; people who are rich and people who are poor; people who are selflessly good and people who traffic in cruelty. Every woman, man, and child carries the indelible image of God. This idea from the first verses of the Bible establishes personal human identity and dignity for every person.

Yet, the goodness of the created world and of the fabric of human society is fractured by sin—disobedience to God’s will. The murder of Abel (Genesis 4) by his brother Cain is a terrible affront to God’s intention. The remainder of Genesis chronicles the pervasiveness and destructiveness of sin and evil. Murder, rape, betrayal, revenge, and retribution all reveal the deep and pervasive damage caused by human sin. God’s creatures—human beings—have diverged so far from God’s good purpose and intent that in Genesis 6:7, God declares: “I regret that I have made them.”

God does not, however, abandon a corrupted creation to its own ways. God reaches out to save and restore, first through Noah and his wife (Genesis 6:9–10:32), then through the calling of Abram and the formation of a covenant community (Genesis 12). Yet even this community is beset by violence, infidelity, and jealousy. Remarkably, as chronicled in Genesis, God persists in reaching out, saving and restoring, even while judging and declaring displeasure with the actions and deeds of God’s people. These repeated saving acts show God’s nature and character more richly and fully, even while society sinks deeper into chaos at every level.

GOD SEES AND GOD ACTS

God’s response to this chaos is found in the Exodus story. In the burning bush God says to Moses, “I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering” (Exodus 3:7). God does not turn from the anguished

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cries of people. God sees and hears oppression, suffering, and misery. God sees all injustice and all of its consequences, all that fails to measure up to the goodness that God intended in creation.

God then acts to deliver, save, and rescue, and ultimately to establish a new reality, evidenced by the plan for a new place, a new land, flowing with milk and honey (Exodus 3:8). But God does not act alone. God invites Moses into the work of compassion, mercy, and justice. Moses recognizes it will be hard, painful, demanding, disruptive, and full of risk to join God in bringing justice to his people. He would rather avoid the task, preferring to look away and defer to someone else. But Moses accepts God's call, and in so doing he becomes a participant in God's work to address human suffering and human injustice.

God despises injustice created and perpetuated by systems and actions that oppress and result in all manner of human suffering. Let this be said clearly and forthrightly: *God has compassion for suffering humanity*. God extends mercy to suffering people. God addresses injustice in our world. God enlists people through the Holy Spirit, as he enlisted Moses, to work with God to bring about change in the structures that create suffering and oppression, along with change in people's lives.

THE MESSAGE OF THE PROPHETS

As God's people are to enter into the new land, they are warned not to forget God's call to be faithful and to remember God: "When the LORD your God brings you into the land he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give you—a land with large, flourishing cities you did not build, houses filled with all kinds of good things you did not provide, wells you did not dig, and vineyards and olive groves you did not plant—then when you eat and are satisfied, be careful that you do not forget the LORD, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (Deuteronomy 6:10-12). And as God provides for them with compassion and mercy, God charges them to provide that same care for others: "When foreigners reside among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigners residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the LORD your God" (Leviticus 19:33-34).

But God's people do forget the Lord, again and again and again. As God's people are established in the land, they begin to forget who they are and who they are called to be. They worship other gods. They do not maintain God's call for care either for the poor or the marginalized or the foreigner. Instead of the beauty of a nation that will bless all the nations of the earth, the people of Israel re-establish the human chaos described in the first chapters of Genesis. Yet, God does not abandon his unfaithful people. God sends prophets to express God's mercy, and to call out injustice caused by human sin, and to call God's people to respond. God thunders in the opening chapter of Isaiah, "Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow" (1:16-17).

Time and again the people of God, while called by God to ministries of compassion, mercy, and justice, contribute to injustice, benefit from oppression, and turn a cold shoulder to the plight of the outcast. Amos 6:4-7 addresses behaviors rooted in self-indulgence: "You lie on beds inlaid with ivory and lounge on your couches...but you do not grieve over the ruin of Joseph." Similarly, Isaiah 58:3 points out self-interest: "Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers." Such self-

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centeredness does not like to be confronted: “There are those who hate the one who reproves in court and detest the one who tells the truth” (Amos 5:10).

These words can pierce our hearts if we contemplate our own lives and the sometimes unseen links between our comfort and the plight of others. The fear of God’s judgment is not paralyzing, but brings us to repentance, conversion, and a righteous response.

Ultimately, to know God is to do justice, and in doing justice we deepen our knowledge of God. “Does it make you a king to have more and more cedar? Did not your father have food and drink? He did what was right and just, so all went well with him. He defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well. Is that not what it means to know me?” declares the LORD” (Jeremiah 22:15-16).

THE PROPHETS’ FULFILLMENT

As he began his work, Jesus read these words from the prophet Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18-19). Jesus—true God in human form—lived this mission in word and deed, fulfilling the words of the prophets.

In his teachings and actions, Jesus confounded the expectations of the believing community, and turned the social structures of his world upside down. His companions were outcasts. In teaching about compassion, his example was the hated Samaritan. He showed mercy to the traitor. He overturned the tables of exploitation in the temple. The rejection of the cross was preceded by his rejection in his hometown. He went without a word of defense to his death at the hands of religious authority and government power. The compassion, mercy, and justice of God are embodied in his own being and life as God incarnate. There is in Jesus an alignment between his character and identity and his actions in the world. In the resurrection we witness God’s vindication of the life and death of Jesus.

THY KINGDOM COME

The central event of the Christian narrative is the death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. In the resurrection of Jesus Christ, God surprises us by breaking into our world. The risen Christ is the sign that God’s rule and kingdom are already present in this broken world. We do not enter that kingdom when we die. We enter it here and now, wherever God’s will breaks into human life. So we pray with Jesus: “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10).

The new Jerusalem—Revelation’s compelling vision of the coming kingdom of God—represents the ultimate and final restoration of a new heaven and a new earth. It is the place where compassion, mercy, and justice have prevailed, and God’s intent is no longer ignored or corrupted. “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Revelation 21:4). The new Jerusalem is a city in which God’s presence is fully revealed and dominant (Revelation 21:22–22:2). Evil will not be present, and sin will be absent as the presence of God creates life, gives purpose, and establishes righteousness for all in that newly established city.

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We are people living in the kingdom of the present, informed and liberated by our understanding of the realized kingdom of the future. Heaven is not simply our escape but the reality that empowers our service today. Each cup of cold water offered, every hungry person fed, every captive set free is both a reflection of and a contribution to the new Jerusalem. Everything done here and now that incarnates God's compassion, mercy, and justice is neither lost nor wasted, just as the act of turning away from sin to become a follower of Jesus is neither lost nor wasted. Certainly there is profound difference between this life and the life to come in the new Jerusalem. But there is also glorious continuity. In his argument for the bodily resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul says, "Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain" (v. 58). God will gather up all that is good and righteous in this life and bring it into God's coming kingdom. How we live our lives matters for eternity. Ministries of compassion, mercy, and justice are not wasted, not in vain, not fleeting. They are eternal.

COVENANT HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS

From its inception the Covenant has cared about ministering to hurting people. In 1886, the year after the church's founding, delegates gathered to chart direction in mission. As noted earlier, one of the first decisions was to establish the Home of Mercy to care for the sick, elderly, and orphaned. That decision set in motion what is today a network of hospitals, retirement communities, enabling residences for developmentally disabled adults, and other community services for at-risk women and children. Combined, these institutions annually provide millions of dollars of free services.

Similarly, soon after the Covenant's founding, the first Covenant missionaries ventured to the territory now known as western Alaska. While preaching the gospel, they also established schools, clinics, and orphanages. This set in motion what is today an expansive global effort that partners with national leadership on five continents to provide education, health care, economic development, clean water, agricultural sustainability, disaster relief, and initiatives such as combating human trafficking.

Local congregations and regional conferences have found countless ways to address community needs through hunger programs, addiction recovery, medical clinics, child care, tutoring, short-term housing shelters, prison visitation, pregnancy support, advocacy for victims of abuse, and more.

Even so, we confess that far too little of our time, talent, and treasure has gone to the gaping needs around us, and far too much has gone to care for and gratify ourselves. We cannot be self-satisfied in our seeming generosity—personally and collectively—when the needs of our communities and the world are so profound and our ability to contribute to make a difference is so great. Jesus clearly warns us in Matthew 25 that we are held accountable for how we treat those at the margins, those who are the "least of these." We will not be immune from that accountability.

We also confess that when we have cared for hurting people, we have been persistently reticent to address the causes that hurt people. We are more comfortable taking up the questions of compassion and mercy: "Who is broken? Who is in need?" We are less comfortable with those of justice: "Why does this brokenness exist? How do we address the causes?"

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Micah 6:8 calls us to love mercy, *do* justice, and to walk humbly with our God. When it comes to doing justice, the ability to document the Covenant Church's engagement is difficult compared to the ways we can point to strides in compassion and mercy.

Throughout our history, the Covenant Church has been silent on matters such as suffrage and Jim Crow laws, and too quiet on many such as civil rights. As the children and grandchildren of the immigrant generation that founded the Covenant settled more fully into the North American experience, memories and sensitivities toward the hardship of newer immigrants were sometimes lost. Concern about poverty and its accompanying issues were not always understood as central to God's call. Like other evangelicals, we often pursued growth at the expense of investing in other priorities of God in the world. There are instances of blatant racism, including churches participating in white-flight from urban areas. Further, while today we may speak to challenging matters of public discipleship through Annual Meeting resolutions on topics such as immigration, criminal justice, and racial righteousness, we confess that these too infrequently translate to specific action. Too often our values and actions are shaped more by political beliefs or financial self-interest than by biblical teaching.

As hard as it is to admit to ourselves, this passivity in engaging matters of justice means that we—individually and collectively—contribute both implicitly and explicitly to perpetuating ills in the world that are offensive to God and destructive to people. We confess this. In repenting we earnestly resolve to follow God's call to do justice and work to make things right in the world. We proceed with Scripture as our frame of reference rather than secular debate in which complex issues often become mired in toxic and self-serving polarization.

One of God's gifts to the Covenant today is our increasing ethnic and socio-economic diversity. For a good part of our history, even beyond our immigrant roots, we lived in a largely Euro-immigrant denominational context, and often chose communities for expansion that reinforced that insularity. In so doing, we did little to help the church in North America experience the power of the cross of Jesus Christ to overcome deep racial, ethnic, and socio-economic divisions. The growing Covenant mosaic and the contributions made by an increasingly diverse leadership are giving us a broader perspective and are inspiring and empowering us as we address issues of injustice in our world. As our community becomes more reflective of the entire kingdom of God, we find new energy and are able to work more persistently on the full scope of God's mission. We are also spurred on by the compelling examples of compassion, mercy, and justice seamlessly lived out by our international friends, often in areas of grinding poverty and exploitation.

In Christ we dare to say at our best we desire to be people who are evangelistic, compassionate, merciful, and just. Yet we confess that we consistently fail to share the good news, act out of compassion, demonstrate mercy, and advocate for justice. We repent, desiring to grow more and more into the kind of people we aspire to be as followers of Jesus Christ. Thankfully God does not give up on us, and so we continue with renewed vibrancy to live fully into the call of the whole mission of God.

CHARACTERISTICS OF BIBLICAL MINISTRY

How do we grow in biblical compassion, mercy, and justice? One of our defining documents, *Covenant Affirmations*, articulates our core values and principles, giving definition to our identity and guiding the

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directions in which we seek to grow in Christ. Similarly, we are aided in the pursuit of compassion, mercy, and justice by affirming a set of Christ-like characteristics that display the kind of people we seek to be in these ministries and that direct our continuing formation as a movement guided by the Holy Spirit.

We do ministries of compassion, mercy, and justice:

Biblically. The Bible is our primary source for inspiration and guidance in the discernment of ministry opportunities, the development of strategies and plans through which we respond, and the articulation of the outcomes that we seek to accomplish.

Prophetically. Guided and empowered by Scripture and the Holy Spirit, we seek to honestly and courageously call out injustice. We speak truth to power and we call God's people to righteous action.

Humbly and prayerfully. We confess our sin. Without humility, prophetic words easily degenerate into arrogant pronouncements. Our belief in "level ground at the cross" helps keep us from acting and thinking that we are in any way superior to those we serve or to those with whom we disagree. Our ongoing prayer acknowledges our dependence on God and our desire to align our living with God's expectation.

Formationally. Engagement in compassion, mercy, and justice ministry is a formational experience for the people who give themselves in service. We engage in these ministries in obedience to Jesus Christ and become more faithful, Christ-like disciples through our personal engagement and investment.

Hopefully. It is only with hope that ministry can be sustained in the face of daunting adversity, entrenched opposition, evil, or simple apathy. Our hope demonstrates our belief in the resurrection, God's great act of hope in the face of death, and the glorious promise of Jesus coming again to establish a new heaven and a new earth. Through acts of compassion, mercy, and justice, God works to create and instill hope.

Holistically. Word and deed, proclamation and demonstration, evangelism and social concern are elements of an integrated whole, not disparate values. There is one gospel of Jesus Christ, which calls for a holistic approach to mission.

Transformationally. Papers such as this are not an end in themselves. They inform and guide us as we seek transformation in individuals, families, churches, communities, and systems of the world through ministries of compassion, mercy, and justice.

Collaboratively. We create and work in partnerships whenever possible. There is strength and wisdom in shared ministry that increases effectiveness and reach. From large institutions with denominationally based governance structures to local food distribution programs, we have a history of doing more over a sustained length of time when there is genuine partnership. Collaboration also extends to communities we serve, offering dignity to each person as God's beloved creation.

Generously. In John 3:16 we read, "God so loved the world that he gave...." God calls his people to break the tragic pattern of selfishness in our world. God calls for generous, consistent, first fruits giving.

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There is no ministry of compassion, mercy, and justice without our commitment to giving sacrificially of our time, our service, and our financial resources.

Gratefully. Again and again we receive forgiveness and new life at the table of our Lord. We are merciful and just toward others out of gratitude to God for the inexpressible compassion, mercy, and justice shown to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus our Lord.

LOCAL COVENANT CHURCH MISSION

The church always begins with certain basic missional affirmations: God loves all people; God is present and at work in the community and in the world; all people are created in the image of God and worthy of dignity and respect; and individual and corporate brokenness are present in the wider community as well as in the church. With these affirmations the church must prayerfully and sometimes recklessly seek ways to participate in God's transforming mission.

As we the church develop the capacity to see the image of God in other people, we find ourselves asking, "Who are the marginalized, voiceless, oppressed, and invisible in our neighborhoods, in our communities, and in our world?" They may be refugees, people who suffer abuse, children lacking opportunity for a good education, people without legal standing, high-school drop outs, people with addictions, the sick, the lonely, prisoners, and victims of crime.

A local church should seek to serve and work together with those in their community and in the wider world in ministries that express compassion and mercy and that work to bring justice. While there is a tendency to develop compassion and mercy ministries that address symptoms of brokenness in the community, the more difficult task is to seek justice by addressing the root causes of the brokenness. We cannot claim to be a biblical people if we are not active in God's mission of compassion, mercy, and justice.

IN CONCLUSION – OUR STORY

In the mid-nineteenth century as Pietism spread throughout Scandinavia, Maria Nilsdotter, grandmother of David Nyvall, was joined by other women in her rural district of Sweden to read and discuss Scripture. To do so, she had to face the displeasure of her alcoholic and abusive husband who tied her to the kitchen stove in an effort to prevent her from attending small groups in neighbors' homes where the Bible was discussed and people prayed.

This simple practice of discussing the Bible and its meaning for life was transformational, leading Maria and her friend, Brigitta Olson, to intervene in the not uncommon practice of auctioning parentless children. While this was ostensibly for the care and nurture of these children, it was usually a form of unregulated child labor and indentured servitude in which many of these children were abused. These women intervened, caring for the children in their own homes. To accommodate growing numbers of these children, Maria built an orphanage and a school on her meager farm using funds they raised through knitting and sewing. Challenged, inspired, and changed by God's word, these women were compelled to join with God in making things right.

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As we today gather to discuss and listen to the powerfully transformational words of the Bible, may these women, and others who have gone before us, inspire and encourage us as we seek to express and live into God's compassion, mercy, and justice in our day.

We pray for this through the power of the Holy Spirit and for Christ's sake.

SCRIPTURAL TEXTS CITED IN THIS PAPER

Old Testament

Genesis 1:31
Genesis 4
Genesis 6:7
Genesis 6:9–10:32
Genesis 12ff
Exodus 3:7-8
Leviticus 19:33-34
Deuteronomy 6:10-12
Jeremiah 22:15-16
Isaiah 1:16-17
Isaiah 58:3
Amos 5:10
Amos 6:4-7
Micah 6:8
Micah 7:19

New Testament

Matthew 6:10
Matthew 25:35-36
Matthew 25:40
Mark 12:29-31
Luke 4:18-19
Luke 7:22
Luke 16:19-31
John 3:16
1 Corinthians 15:58
Revelation 21:4
Revelation 21:22–22:2

(All scriptural quotations cited in this paper are from the TNIV.)