



History: History and Virtues

What if you planned a history unit around justice, mercy, and humility?

Robert wanted to use the biblical concepts of justice, mercy, and humility as a way of organizing his planning for teaching about nineteenth century American reformers so that the learning was not just about the facts, but about people's response to the world around them. He used Micah 6:8 which talks about acting with justice and mercy and walking humbly with God.

"I made sure the voices of groups often marginalized in mainstream history were included, stories of the experiences of women, children, and the working classes. I felt it was important that a range of different Christian responses to the events of the time be included. The nineteenth century was an era of social ferment, bold ideas, bitter debates, and even civil war, focused on the question of how to improve American society. Churches and Christians of various stripes figured prominently as the leaders of reform movements. The early feminists, such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Catherine Beecher, drew their inspiration for their religious roots. Dorothea Dix and Clara Barton saw their work among the sick as following in the footsteps of Christ's command to show mercy. Antislavery campaigners such as Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, and Charles Grandison Finney viewed the 'peculiar institution' of slavery as an affront to the idea that all were created in the image of God. Temperance advocates such as Neal Dow and Frances Willard believed alcohol consumption stood at the root of other social ills, especially poverty.

"Including a range of voices like this is itself a humble act because it enables the responses of Christians from another time, place, and culture to speak to our present assumptions; it also avoids idealizing Christian responses of the past. I wanted students to think what minority voices they wanted future historians to listen to when studying our own age."

What's going on here?

Robert saw his history lesson as being about meaning, significance and relevance, not just facts. It was about approaching the past with humility rather than superiority, and connecting learning to questions of justice.

He engaged learners experientially through stories, helping them focus their attention on justice, mercy and humility in connection with historical actions. He had them reflect on both positive and negative examples.

Robert reshaped his practice by choosing key concepts to shape his planning (justice, mercy, humility), changing the examples he used drawing on faith sources (a range of faith examples and minority voices), and using the examples and questions to shape the atmosphere he was creating (being critical as well as having the humility to learn from).

What does this have to do with faith, hope, and love?

The concepts of justice, mercy, and humility are deeply woven into the Christian faith; all are an expression of love. God's love and mercy were shown when Jesus came in humility as a baby and died on a cross. God shows mercy to people when he offers forgiveness through his son, bringing people hope and a fresh start. Throughout the Bible, God is described as a God of justice who demands that people act justly toward each other so that justice "rolls like a river" to bring hope for communities (Amos 5:24). Injustice will have no place in the new creation that the Lord Jesus came to inaugurate (Isaiah 11:4).

What difference does it make?

Planning using these concepts shifted the focus and allowed students to see that Christian responses can either bless or blight society, aiding justice or injustice. Our actions have the potential to do the same in the present. Making audible the voices we don't often hear in historical accounts modeled pursuing justice and implied that history is not all about big political events, it's also about ordinary people.

Where could we go from here?

You can use [Micah 6:8](#) to evaluate existing units of work or to plan new ones. Even if you aren't responsible for curriculum planning in your department, you can choose one of your own lessons to plan differently. Here are some questions that might help:

- What story does this tell of justice or injustice?
- Is this an issue of injustice that still affects people today?
- What has motivated the agents of change involved (e.g., economics, politics, religious principles, expediency, love)?
- Whose voices do we usually hear when I teach this?
- Have Christians responded to this in different ways (past and present)?

Digging deeper

Life has been described as one thing after another with little meaning: just a collection of events and facts. Human beings seldom have been satisfied with this. Every generation has asked, "What is the purpose of life? What does it all mean?" Human beings are people in search of [meaning](#). This changes approaches to subjects such as history. We can ask questions about people's responses that explore their motivation, including their faith. Belief in a good Creator assures Christians that he has not created a meaningless universe.

There is within every soul a thirst for happiness and meaning. Thomas Aquinas

Throughout the Old Testament God intervenes on behalf of the powerless (Psalm 72, 7, 12), often represented as the orphan the widow and the stranger—those with no one to defend them. God expects his people to make [justice](#) and redressing wrongs their aim ([Isaiah 1:13-17](#)). God calls people to follow "justice and only justice" ([Deuteronomy 16:20](#)). In her song, Mary reflects on a God of justice who humbles the proud and lifts the poor ([Luke 1:51-52](#)). Jesus welcomed the marginalized, mixing with the poor, the rejected, and people labeled sinners by others ([Matthew 9:10-12](#)).



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