

IMMERSE

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Generation Justice

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A few years ago I was sitting across my dining room table talking to a teenage girl who was visiting for a few days. Let's call her Rania. We chatted about her friends, boys, school, the cute things the little kids do at her daycare center—pretty typical stuff. Except when she started talking about the day she learned she has AIDS.

Rania was visiting us from a large city in South Asia where she'd been forced to sell her body for sex. She was tricked into becoming a prostitute, and by no fault of her own she was facing a life punctuated by the realities of living with a deadly disease. In that moment at my dining room table, I found myself asking God a pretty scary question: *Where was justice for Rania?*

The Horrifying Truth

The sad fact is that Rania is not alone. UNICEF estimates that one million people are forced into the sex trade each year. They're among the estimated 27 million people worldwide who are victims of slavery (Cockburn, A. "21st-Century Slaves" *National Geographic*, Sept. 2003). Human trafficking is a massive black-market enterprise that generates an estimated \$9.5 billion annually (U.S. Department of State, Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, *Trafficking in Persons Report*, 2006).

For the overwhelming majority of these millions of people—owned by others—there is no justice. They'll work as slaves until they die, or in the case of sex slaves, until they're no longer desirable to customers and are thrown into the streets to fend for themselves. Sex slavery and other forms of human trafficking are among the biggest humanitarian crises of our day.

Misguided Priorities

Unfortunately the church isn't on the front lines of such humanitarian crises—it stands on the sidelines. As such, the church is often viewed as either too afraid or impotent to help with the fight, or else simply too distracted by marginal issues.

Whether this depiction is accurate or not, as followers of Christ we should examine whether our faith is living up to what our Creator asks of us. And, as youth workers specifically, we should consider whether the guidance and faith formation we pass along to our students are equipping and preparing them to bring God's power and light to the great challenges of our time.

This confusion of priorities has been handicapping God's people for thousands of years—it's nothing new. The prophet Micah told the Israelites to stop concentrating their efforts on petty issues and focus on the things closest to God's heart. I can just hear the frustration in the prophet's voice when he says, "He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8).

Jesus himself refers to the very heart of the latter verse when chastising the religious leaders for their skewed priorities: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice, mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others" (Matthew 23:23 NASB).

From both of these verses, we see that justice, mercy, and faithfulness are central to what it means to be a disciple of Christ. And as disciples of Christ, we're called not only to develop these characteristics in ourselves but also to bring justice, mercy, and faithfulness to a hurting world. In fact, in Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats, he indicates that those who serve the needy and oppressed are the ones invited into eternal life (Matthew 25:31-46).

Justice Served

In Rania's case, justice was served. I work for a Christian human rights organization called International Justice Mission. We're a group of lawyers, investigators, educators, and human rights professionals who rescue victims of violence, sexual exploitation, slavery, and oppression around the world.

One of IJM's undercover investigators found Rania in the brothel where she was being held captive. We were able to put together evidence of the crimes committed against her (forced prostitution is illegal in her country) and then partnered with local law enforcement to raid the brothel and rescue her. She was taken to an aftercare home for girls where she receives the emotional, spiritual, and medical support she needs to recover from the abuse she suffered. Rania's traffickers were later sentenced to 10 and 15 years in prison, and the owner of the brothel was sentenced to 10 years.

Rania's cries were heard. She was rescued.

But she also contracted AIDS. Not an uncommon result for victims of sex trafficking and sexual assault. In my prayers for Rania and the other girls I know who suffer as she does, I often find myself crying out to God in confusion: "God, what are you doing?" At times I fear that if I hear one more

story about an innocent girl getting AIDS from the evil men and women who exploit her day in and day out, my heart will give in to the easy escape of cynicism. In my lack of faith, I often feel as though I'm at a cliff's edge, ready to fall into a pit of paralysis and despair.

But it's in those moments of raw doubt that I am reminded of how much God cares about these victims—more than I could ever imagine. And God has a plan to rescue and redeem them. I've seen this plan at work—I am, in fact, a part of this plan. In the four years I've worked at IJM, I've seen God's goodness and justice—and it's coming from, of all places, the church. And even more strikingly, it's coming from our young people.

The Tipping Point

I believe we're standing at the edge of a major, historical shift—one that follows other significant shifts in recent church history. One was the global missions movement around 150 years ago, when the church became aware that a large majority of the world had never heard the Gospel. So Christians, most of whom were part of a student movement, relocated *en masse* to the far reaches of the world to share the good news of salvation. Today, we can't imagine Christianity without global missions.

Another shift took place after World War II and the Korean War. Those who came back to America had seen the incredible needs of a literally broken and devastated world. Thus began Christian relief and development organizations such as World Vision, Compassion International, Food for the Hungry, World Relief, and others. These organizations have tried to ease the suffering of those who don't have the necessities of life—food, shelter, medicine, and water. And by doing so, they're bringing God's light and goodness to a broken world. Today, we can't imagine authentic Christianity without including this aspect of mercy and compassion.

I believe the next shift for the church is a rise to its calling to, "Do justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan and plead for the widow" (Isaiah 1:17). It's already happening; I've seen it with my own eyes. Not only have I seen it in the lives of the thousands of victims IJM has rescued over the last decade but also in the way the church has increasingly decided to consider how it can rescue the oppressed.

Whole congregations are exploring what this means for them—they have opened new IJM offices, included justice in their teachings, trained sister churches in the developing world about protecting their attendees from injustice, created homes for girls ravaged by forced prostitution, and rallied their talents and resources to confront injustice in their own streets. I could list story after story, but I believe the greatest source of hope lies in the power and potential of the generation of students you and I serve.

Our Students Will Lead the Charge

The church is now laying the groundwork for massive growth in the response to those in our communities and around the world suffering at the hands of violent oppressors. But our students are the ones who'll bring it to fruition because they're uniquely wired to effectively meet this need. They're more highly educated than any previous generation, and they have unprecedented access to information and the world through technology.

The prophet Amos says, "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (5:24). Students today are like water building behind a dam; one day soon that dam will break under the pressure, and justice will roll down in an everlasting stream.

And while our kids have been raised in a society that's told them they can do whatever it is they put their minds to, they're largely unsatisfied with traditional understandings of success. They not only want to achieve, but they also want those achievements to matter. Today's students are challenged by the great problems in our world, not paralyzed by them.

They're inspired to change the world—and they actually believe they can. Some may call this youthful *naïveté*, but I call it a generational calling and vision. And I think it's providential that this generation has a vision to change the world when there are such massive worldwide needs—the likes of which the world has never seen: AIDS devastating an entire continent and beyond, the plight of refugees in war-torn regions, and 27 million people living in slavery, just to name a few.

In my work with IJM's student ministry programs, I've had the privilege to see this generation in action. I've talked with countless high school and college students desperate to get involved in bringing rescue to the oppressed. Their passion is humbling—and incredibly motivating.

The Enemy

I believe Satan trembles each time a student understands this call to "do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God" because he knows they have the courage and power to be effective—and also believe Satan will do anything in his power to thwart the good works "God prepared in advance for them to do" (Ephesians 2:10).

One of the pitfalls of the incredible amount of information that today's students have at their fingertips is that they're always looking for "the next big thing." Recently, that "big thing" has become justice. Right now justice seems exciting and trendy. I believe Satan is using this to his advantage by capitalizing on students' short attention spans and preventing them from making the necessary commitments to relentlessly pursue justice long term.

The only way to turn their passions into true commitment is for students (or anyone for that matter) to have a real, transforming relationship with the living God who passionately loves the oppressed, hears their cries, and is asking all of us to be part of their rescue and justice. Therefore we need to steward their interests well in order to ensure that justice isn't merely a

temporary hot topic in Christianity, but that it actually becomes central to their faith.

The Faith Factor

Acts of mercy and justice are incomplete if they aren't built upon a foundation of faith. There's a symbiotic relationship between faith and action. Just as James tells us that "faith without works is dead" (James 2:26), Paul tells us that if we do all the great works we can think of, but don't have love, then we're just empty noise (1 Corinthians 13:1-3). Jesus himself says we can't do *anything* apart from him (John 15:5). The entire Law is summed up in two commandments: first, to love God above everything else, and second, to love your neighbor as yourself (Mark 12:30-31).

We *must* take seriously God's call to us in Micah 6:8 and Matthew 23:23 to "do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our God." How disastrous would it be for our students and for the world if we sacrifice parts of God's call for another? Mercy and justice are nothing without faith in God. And faith in God is dead if mercy and justice aren't flowing out of it.

As I strive to engage college and high school students in works of justice, I need to be conscious that I'm not neglecting the process of helping them build their faith. As I lead and mentor my small group of girls at church, I need to be sure I'm modeling a life that reflects faith, mercy, and justice. As a youth leader, you may want to ask yourself if your ministry is fulfilling the mandate we find in Micah and in the words of Jesus.

Our Mission

I'm excited to see that materials and programs are being created to teach about mercy and compassion for the poor in our world (see the sidebar for a few of these)—resources intended to guide your students toward an authentic and transforming faith. I'd encourage you to search for ways to engage young people in bringing God's justice to the oppressed.

We all know that this journey of following Christ requires courage and the faith to jump into the risks God asks of us. My colleague Sharon Cohn recently told 22,000 college students at the Urbana Missions Conference, "I think God demands and provides courage not just to give us character, but to give others life."

May we lead and equip our students to bring life to a dying world. May we bring faith, mercy, and justice to the millions in our world who suffer. May our actions not only bring rescue to the millions of girls like Rania, but also an end to oppression and injustice so we never again hear a story about a girl contracting AIDS from being forced into prostitution.

These are big things to hope for, but our God is a big God. My prayer for you and for the students you lead is to see the truth realized that God "is

able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us" (Ephesians 3:15).

Do Justice

International Justice Mission provides multiple ways you and the students you lead can dig deeper into God's call to seek justice.

The Justice Mission (www.justicemission.org)

A collaborative effort between International Justice Mission and Youth Specialties, this video-enhanced youth curriculum reflects the heart of God for the oppressed of the world. Over five sessions, it takes you inside the work of International Justice Mission to see the reality of injustice in the world and what you can do about it.

Relentless: A Movement to End Oppression (www.relentlesscampaign.org)

IJM's new student campaign offers resources to students so they can learn more about injustice, ways to spread the word to their friends, and tools to take action against oppression.

International Justice Mission (www.ijm.org)

The IJM Web site is a great resource to find out what IJM is doing around the world anytime you need to know.