



Chapter 03

Tobit & Justice

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UNDERSTANDING

What do I need to know about this passage?

Among the Israelites in Nineveh, Tobit was alone. He was an exile, a stranger in a strange land filled with foreign people. Even his fellow Israelites had deserted their duty to honor God's laws for the sake of blending into a pagan society.

Tobit's life could have been much easier had he done the same. He could have been more popular and had more material possessions. But easy living required a sacrifice of integrity, infidelity to God, and abandonment of the Jewish law.

What would you do if you were Tobit? Would you stay faithful to God even if no one was doing it with you? Would you follow the trends of culture out of fear or desire for acceptance? What happens when duty requires you to go against the masses, possibly sacrificing friends, status, wealth, or more?

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As we study Tobit's story, we will learn that faithfulness to God often comes with a cost. But Tobit was driven by something much deeper and stronger than a desire for acceptance. Tobit had a strong sense of justice, a virtue that enabled him to be devoted both to God and his neighbor, consistently giving each what they are owed.

Most of us associate the concept of justice with the legal field, or the current battle for social justice playing out in society. The virtue of justice, however, is not merely about what we are owed; it is primarily about what we owe to others. When lived well, the virtue of justice empowers us to become people of integrity and character capable of bringing goodness into a broken world through righteous living and works of mercy. Let's look at Tobit's story, which challenges us to live justly, even in an unjust world.

Tobit

It had been almost 300 years since the reign of King David, and the kingdom of Israel knew almost nothing but division and destruction. As Israel devolved into chaos, Tobit's tribe abandoned God.

As a young man, Tobit witnesses his relatives slide into idolatry, pagan sacrifices, sexual promiscuity, and worse. But Tobit remains faithful to God. He continues to travel to Jerusalem

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to celebrate holy days, offer tithes, and make sacrifices to God. Unlike his kinsman, Tobit generously offers alms to orphans and widows. Even when he is forced to leave his homeland to dwell in the alluring, decadent, pagan culture of Nineveh, Tobit's fidelity to God never waivers.

When his family prepares pagan food, Tobit abstains. When he learns his cousin is in need, Tobit doesn't hesitate to make an arduous journey to another province to help. He offers the food off his table and clothing off his back to care for the poor. In his most courageous act, Tobit chooses to bury the dead against the command of the Assyrian King, who murdered Israelites and left their bodies unburied as a sign of humiliation and terror. But Tobit, obedient to God's law, secretly buries them, aware that, if he gets caught, the king will make sure he joins the dead outside the city gates.

Eventually, however, the king finds out and sets out to kill him. Tobit flees while the government confiscates all his property, his entire livelihood. Imagine how Tobit must have felt. While his relatives live in comfort, he is now on the run, away from his family, and stripped of all he owns. How easy it would have been for him to reject God or compromise with the culture around him. Still, he endures, and God provides. A new king rises to power, and Tobit returns to

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his home with nothing but his wife and child. Together, they begin to rebuild their lives.

Throughout his story, Tobit remains faithful to what is most important, acting justly toward God and neighbor, and teaching others to do the same. Even when God seems distant, he instructs his son Tobiah to, "Revere the Lord all your days...and refuse to sin or to transgress his commandments. Live uprightly all the days of your life, and do not walk in the ways of wrongdoing; for those who act in accordance with truth will prosper in all their activities. To all those who practice righteousness" (4:5-6).

Things eventually turn out well for Tobit, but the road that led to such blessings was difficult. Yet, Tobit's focus was never primarily on his own sufferings, but on fulfilling his duties to God and man. This is what makes him a model of justice for us.

Justice

Justice is rendering to another what is rightly owed. It is "the moral virtue that consists of the constant and firm will to give [our] due to God and neighbor" (CCC 1807).

To understand the virtue of justice and how we are called to live it, we must first understand who God is and how he created the world. Because when we

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live justice, we align ourselves more closely with God's original vision of the world and how it was made. This brings about peace, righteousness, and human flourishing. But how do we know what we owe to other people, and how do we practically act with justice? St. Thomas Aquinas taught that justice can be separated into two main categories: what we owe God and what we owe our neighbor.

What we owe God:

St. Thomas Aquinas called justice toward God, the "virtue of religion" (CCC 1807). When we practice the virtue of religion, we give worship to God because He is God and He deserves it.

God is the Creator and ultimate End of the universe. He is the source of all things, and we are the undeserved recipients of His many blessings. When we practice the virtue of religion, we live according to these truths by making Him the center of our lives through prayer and devotion as well as participating in the sacraments.

But how often do we invert this ordering and focus our attention on what we think God "owes" us,

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rather than what we owe Him? If we are honest, we might find that we are more interested in God approving of our behavior, making our lives easier, and fulfilling our worldly desires, than we are in simply living in relationship with Him each day and loving and serving Him by giving Him what is His due: our worship, our devotion, our hearts. Of course, we have very real needs that we can bring to God in prayer, but are we also approaching Him to honor and revere Him for Who He is and not simply what we hope He might do for us?

What we owe our neighbor:

Jesus tells us that the two greatest commands are to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. If we truly love God and want to worship Him, then we must also love others and give them their due.

But what exactly do we owe others? In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus offers us a foundational understanding of justice, "do unto others what you would have them do unto you" (Lk 6:31). We are called to treat others the way we want to be treated. We are called to treat others with the dignity they deserve as beloved men and women made in the image and likeness of God.

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Justice impacts all our relationships. Here are a few of the many things we can consider when it comes to living justly with others:

- Respecting and honoring others, even if we disagree with them, instead of disrespecting or degrading them
- Expressing gratitude to those who serve us in various ways, instead of taking the people in our lives for granted
- Speaking kindly and honestly, instead of engaging in lies, critical or complaining speech, or gossip
- Honoring our commitments, instead of breaking our word, our promises, or neglecting our responsibilities
- Working with integrity, instead of stealing time or doing the bare minimum
- Giving alms and caring for the poor and suffering, instead of neglecting our duty to serve those in need
- Paying fair wages and charging fair prices instead of scamming employees or customers

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When we consider these examples, we realize that being just toward our neighbor is a high calling. Living the virtue of justice means becoming people who act selflessly towards other people and uphold their human dignity. It requires us to tell the truth and speak justly. It means working with integrity, honoring others in our job, our schoolwork, or in our business. Living the golden rule may seem simple, but a deeper look at this concept likely reveals many opportunities for us to grow.

Tobit teaches us how to live this way. His life revolves around fulfilling his duty to God and neighbor. Even as Tobit introduces himself to us, he reveals that he is a man who boldly embodies the virtue of religion (Tobit 1:3). He understands who God is and what He has done for His people. Because Tobit remembers God with all His heart, he remains faithful to Him through hardships. He keeps God's law, travels far to celebrate feasts and offer sacrifices. He abstains from foods and practices that go against God's commands and continues to stay steadfast in his faith when he experiences repeated suffering and tragedies.

Tobit has given himself over to God's ways so completely that his love for Him spills over into the way he treats others. He acts justly toward his neighbors, but his generosity moves beyond mere duty, and overflows into love. The Church

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has a name for the kind of love Tobit gave to his neighbors: the corporal works of mercy.

Application: Works of Mercy

The Church recognizes that there are circumstances and environments where justice is lacking. There, mercy fills the gaps. “Mercy is not the opposite of justice. Rather, it should be thought of as restoring justice and right order to people’s situations and souls when they have become wrong and disordered.”¹ We can think of mercy as “as righting wrong, of lifting up those who have fallen, ever restoring all those in society (as much as is possible) to the place they should be, were the world not fallen.”²

In these cases, the Church calls us to love our neighbor by living what are called “the works of mercy.” When we fulfill them, we make a gift of ourselves to others by meeting their needs and ensuring that they are known, loved, and cared for.

Consistently throughout the Scriptures, we see that God cares deeply for the poor (Is 29:19, Prov 14:31, Ps 34:6). The corporal works of mercy specifically aim to take care of some of the most fundamental material needs of others. They are “feeding the

¹ Moloney, Daniel. *Mercy: What Every Catholic Should Know*. Augustine Institute - Ignatius Press, 2020, p. 167.

² Ibid.

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hungry, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned, and burying the dead. Among all these, giving alms to the poor is one of the chief witnesses to fraternal charity: it is also a work of justice pleasing to God” (CCC 2447).

The works of mercy flow from our love of God, but they also help to continue to establish justice in our communities. We may not be able to fix all aspects of a fallen world, only God can perform such a miracle. Still, He invites us to play a role in bringing about His kingdom on earth through daily acts of justice and mercy. When we live justice well, fulfilling our duties toward God and others, or performing works of mercy, we participate in God’s plan for restoration. Even if we are doing it alone and can’t always see the fruit of our efforts, we can trust that God is working through our simple actions to bring justice into an unjust world.

Tobit lived the works of mercy daily. He gave money to the poor, offered his own bread and clothing to those in need, cared for the orphans and the widows, and buried the dead. When he did these things, he went beyond the requirements of justice and performed the works of mercy that are so close to God’s heart.

Jesus reminds us that when we perform the works of mercy for “the least of these my brethren,” we

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are giving that same kindness to Jesus Himself (Mt 25:40). Whatever we do to them—or do not do to them—is ultimately what we do to Him.

How many of us can say that we deeply yearn to give God His due, and care for our neighbor? We might vaguely care about living in a just society, but many of us act in self-centered ways focused on what we want and what is best for us. Tobit's story invites us to consider true justice. Are we willing to stay faithful to God when we are the only ones who remember Him? Are we willing to practice the works of mercy, regardless of our own circumstances? Tobit pursued justice regardless of the cost, and he challenges us to become the kind of people who do that same.

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DISCUSSION

Tobit 1:3–12
 Tobit 1:16–18
 Tobit 1:19–20
 Tobit 4:5–11
 Tobit 4:21

Discussion guide for your Bible study

01. Launching Question: Have you ever been in a circumstance you felt was unjust or unfair? What was it and how did it make you feel?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud:

It makes sense that we long for justice. God created the world in justice that reflects His own perfection. Though sin entered the world and disrupted that harmony, it is the virtue of justice that empowers us to become people capable of bringing goodness into a broken world.

Share a brief introduction to the virtue of justice (giving our due to God and neighbor); explain that the virtue of justice is more than a legal term or a battle for “social justice” as we often hear about. Refer to CCC 1807.

Please read aloud:

Most of us are quick to call for justice when

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we have been wronged or feel we are owed something. That’s easy. But how often do we see justice as something we owe to others—duties towards God and neighbor? Today, we are going to explore the story of a man named Tobit to learn from his example of a just life.

To understand the context of Tobit’s story, here is a little background: It had been almost 300 years since the reign of King David, and the kingdom of Israel knew almost nothing but division and destruction. As Israel devolved into chaos, Tobit’s tribe abandoned God. As a young man, Tobit witnesses his relatives slide into idolatry, pagan sacrifices, sexual promiscuity, and worse. But Tobit remains faithful to God.

Read Tobit 1:3–12

02. How does Tobit “give his due” to God?

Allow the group to discuss.

Answer: Tobit continues to travel to Jerusalem to celebrate holy days, offer tithes, and make sacrifices to God; loving and serving Him as He asks. Significantly, Tobit gives God a prime place in his thoughts as he “remembered God with all his heart.”

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Please read aloud:

St. Thomas Aquinas called justice toward God the “virtue of religion.” When we practice the virtue of religion, we give God what He deserves because He is God: worship, devotion, obedience, etc.

But how often do we invert this ordering and focus our attention on what we think God “owes” us, rather than what we owe Him? If we are honest, we might find we are more interested in God approving of our behavior, making our lives easier, and fulfilling our worldly desires, than we are in giving Him what is His due: our worship, our devotion, our hearts.

03. Does Tobit seem more concerned about his own problems or giving to God what he deserves because He is God? Why?

Allow the group to discuss.

Answer: While engaging in works of worship or charity, Tobit is unmotivated by personal interest or gain. He simply wants to give God His due, avoiding complaint or asking for anything in return.

04. Tobit is an outstanding model of the virtue of religion, especially considering his circumstances. What are some of the ways his friends, family and other

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circumstances make loving God particularly difficult?

Allow the group to discuss.

Answer: Everything around Tobit—the environment, the people, the culture—encourages him to forget God. Examples include: his abandonment as an orphan (1:8); the whole of his family forsaking God to practice idolatry (1:4–5); his capture and exile into a foreign pagan nation (1:10); and all his friends and family eating forbidden pagan food (1:10).

05. Tobit persisted in faithfulness alone, without the support of his friends and family. How do you personally tend to respond when everyone around you is acting unfaithfully?

Allow the group to discuss.

It’s clear that Tobit is a man capable of rising above his circumstances. He gives God what He is due, even if no one else is willing to join him. But let’s discuss how Tobit treats others, especially the people that make faithful living so difficult for him.

Read Tobit 1:16–18

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06. What are some of the ways that Tobit serves his brethren?

Answer: Tobit feeds the hungry, clothes the naked, and, at the risk of his life, buries the dead.

07. We've discussed what it means to treat God justly. What do you think it means to treat others justly? Why do you think Tobit continued to treat others justly, even when they weren't just toward him?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud:

Jesus teaches us that the two greatest commands are to love God with all your heart, soul, and mind, and to love your neighbor as yourself. If we love God and want to worship Him, then we must also love others and give them their due: "Do unto others what you would have them do unto you" (Lk 6:31). Most of us have heard this before, but it is easier said than done. Some of its requirements are:

Note to the leader: Optionally pull out a whiteboard and list out the following (feel free to abbreviate), encouraging your group to help you add to the list.

- Respecting and honoring others instead of disrespecting or degrading them

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- Speaking kindly and honestly instead of engaging in lies and gossip
 - Honoring commitments instead of breaking them (even small ones)
 - Listening to others with care and attention instead of distractedly wishing we were somewhere else or with someone else
 - Working with integrity instead of stealing time from employers or doing the bare minimum
 - Paying fair wages and charging fair prices instead of scamming employees or customers
08. Having considered these examples, how have you personally succeeded in giving others their due? How have you fallen short?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud:

Tobit stops at nothing to fulfill his duty to God and neighbor. One might expect that, because of his faithfulness, Tobit would be constantly rewarded by God. However, while God does ultimately bless him, the pattern of Tobit's life reveals a path that we might not consider a blessing.

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Read Tobit 1:19–20

09. Tobit remained faithful to God in a faithless culture. And, while his family and friends remain unscathed, he is cast out of his home, stripped of his possessions, forced to run for his life—all for attempting to bury the body of a fellow Israelite. What do you think Tobit would have been feeling at this moment? Towards his brethren? Towards God? Toward “acting with justice” in general?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud:

Despite everything, Tobit persists. A new king rises to power, and Tobit eventually returns to his home with nothing but his wife and child. Together, they begin to slowly rebuild their lives.

Throughout Tobit’s story he continues to experience suffering, misfortune, and ridicule, despite, and often because of, his righteousness. After so many hardships, it would be natural for Tobit to lose his determination to act with justice towards God and neighbor.

Later on, as a result of another attempt to bury the body of a slain relative, Tobit finds himself impoverished, disgraced, and even blinded. His world reeling, he asks God for death and gives what he believes to be his final advice to his son.

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Read Tobit 4:5–11 and 4:21

10. Write an observation question about the content of Tobit’s advice to his son. You may also write an understanding question.

Answers may include: Tobit exhorts his son to obey God’s commandments, with a particular focus on almsgiving towards the poor.

Please read aloud:

Despite great misfortune, Tobit’s convictions are completely unchanged, perhaps even strengthened. Despite having lost everything, he exhorts his son to live as he has, serving God and neighbor with justice.

The Church has a name for this kind of charity: The “Corporal Works of Mercy.” They consist in “feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned, and burying the dead. Among all these, giving alms to the poor is one of the chief witnesses to fraternal charity: it is also a work of justice pleasing to God” (CCC 2447).

11. Write an understanding question about the connection between mercy and justice (often thought to be opposed). Help your participants to see that Mercy—particularly in the Corporal Works—is not opposed to Justice but actually restores it.

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Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud:

Where justice is lacking, mercy fills the gaps. “Mercy is not the opposite of justice. Rather, it should be thought of as restoring justice and right order to people’s situations and souls when they have become wrong and disordered.” We can think of mercy as “as righting wrong, of lifting up those who have fallen, ever restoring all those in society (as much as is possible) to the place they should be, were the world not fallen.”¹

When we live justice well, we participate in God’s plan for restoration. Even if doing it alone, God will move through our actions to bring justice into an unjust world. Jesus even tells us that when we perform the works of mercy for “the least of these my brethren,” we are giving that same kindness to Jesus Himself (Mt 25:40).

12. While it can be easy to complain about injustice in the world, acts of mercy can be difficult. What about you? Are the Corporal Works of Mercy a regular part of your walk of discipleship? If not, how might you begin to live them?

Allow the group to discuss.

¹ Moloney, Daniel. *Mercy: What Every Catholic Should Know*. Austine Institute - Ignatius Press, 2020, p. 167.

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Note to the Leader: If helpful, write out the Corporal Works of Mercy on a whiteboard or a piece of paper. Ideally your participants all leave with a specific resolution on how they might better incorporate them into their lives.

Please read aloud:

Living with justice in an unjust world is challenging. It can be easy to vaguely care about living in a just society, but difficult to live out the virtue of justice to make such a society a reality. Tobit’s story invites us to consider true justice. Are we willing to stay faithful to God when we are the only ones who remember Him? Are we willing to care for our neighbor, even when life has been unkind? Are we willing to practice the works of mercy regardless of our own circumstances?

Tobit pursued justice regardless of the cost, and he challenges us to become the kind of people who do the same.