**Christians in action to bring justice to the world God loves**
Our task is to follow in the path of all who who have heeded God's call, to:

Proverbs 31:8 *"Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves ...."*

Isaiah 1:17 *"Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow".*

Proverbs 24:1 *Rescue those being led away to death; hold back those staggering toward slaughter.*



**William Wilberforce** (1759-1833) served within Britain's Parliament and laboured for fifty years to bring release to slaves across the empire. He and others constantly produced publications and spoke tirelessly to challenge society. His friend Josiah Wedgewood made and gave away thousands of **"slave medallions"** featuring the stirring words *Am I not a man and a brother*. On hats, snuff boxes, and jugs, slave images were used with great effect.





**The 7th Earl of Shaftesbury** (1801-1885) served in Britain's Parliament to expose great injustice. He spoke on behalf of boys who were forced up chimneys to clean them (sometimes fatally) and on behalf of children aged as young as four who worked in mines under awful conditions.

In Australia, **Caroline Chisholm** (1808-1877) worked against injustice, and helped poor women in Sydney, rescuing many who lived on the streets. Though lacking resources, she found work and homes for about 11,000 women.





In the USA, **Martin Luther King** (1929-1968) championed the rights of black Americans, though inspiring speeches that challenged racism and oppression. He spoke - knowing that his efforts would cost him his life before he would see justice.


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# *Applying the justice and mercy of God*


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*East India sugar not made by slaves.*
*By six families using East India instead of*
*West India sugar, one slave less is required.*

- the words and picture displayed on sugar bowls in Britain, to raise concern about slavery

**Jesus ministering justice and mercy**
Luke 4:18-19 describes Jesus reading from the Prophet Isaiah, saying:

> *"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."*

This text is often misunderstood in three ways. Firstly, it is misunderstood to mean that God favours the poor. While the poor tend to be more willing to follow Jesus (as they are more aware of spiritual needs) God resists all bias towards rich or poor. In Exodus 23:3 God said, *"... do not show favouritism to a poor man in his lawsuit"* and in Leviticus 19:15 he said, *"Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favouritism to the great...".*

Secondly, the text is sometimes given only a spiritual meaning, by people who pray for the poor, but do nothing to relieve oppression. Thirdly, the text is sometimes given only a material meaning, by those who address physical but not spiritual needs, as when some Christians feed the hungry, but do not urge them to turn to God.

In contrast, Jesus showed in his work the right meaning of the text. In his earthly ministry he announced the coming kingdom - being merciful to those who were humble, but rebuking oppressors and the self-righteous, and challenging unjust authorities. In the death of Jesus, God *demonstrates his justice* (Romans 3:25) as sins were paid for. As risen Lord, Jesus extends mercy by offering forgiveness to all who deserve punishment.

**Social, political, and religious reactions to the good news**

Jesus challenged negative views about women, children and outcasts. He defended a woman whose critics *rebuked her harshly* (Mark 14:5) - he told them to *"Leave her alone"* (14:6). To those who tried to keep children away he said, *"do not hinder them"* (Matthew 19:14). Jesus cared for prostitutes, the blind, and tax-collectors. He chose to heal a leper by touch (Luke 5:13) - not just by command - though lepers were unclean (Leviticus 13:45).

Along with many plots, four gospel episodes describe attempts on the life of Jesus. The first was Herod's massacre of infants (Matthew 2:16). The second occurred as Jesus challenged racism at Nazareth (Luke 4:29-30):

> *They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him down the cliff, but he walked right through the crowd and went on his way.*

Thirdly, at the temple, when Jesus said he was *"before Abraham"* people picked up stones to kill him (John 8:59). Fourthly, they picked up stones to kill Jesus who said, *"I and the Father are one"* (John 10:30-31) and tried to seize him for saying, *"the Father is in me"* (John 10:39). People also told lies about Jesus, calling him *a glutton and a drunkard* (Matthew 11:19), *a Samaritan* (John 8:48), *demon-possessed and raving mad* (John 10:20).

Announcing God's rule, Jesus engaged in several acts of civil disobedience. When Herod the Tetrach wanted to kill him, Jesus said: *"Go tell that fox, '... I will reach my goal' "* (Luke 13:32). Jesus overturned tables in the temple, though it was under the "Roman Peace" (the *Pax Romana*) and Governor Pontius Pilate controlled the temple and its funds ("Pilate", *New Bible Dictionary* IVP, 1982). On trial, he refused to answer Governor Pontius Pilate, but when Pilate spoke of his own power, Jesus said: *You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above* (John 19:11).

**Economic consequences of the good news**

Paul's ministry of the gospel had economic consequences that caused much trouble. In Philippi, when he expelled a spirit from a slave-girl, she lost the money-making ability to tell the future. So her owners took action against Paul and Silas, who were jailed and severely beaten (Acts 16). In Ephesus, when Paul spoke against man-made gods, the whole city was enraged and a riot occurred - as local silversmiths feared a loss of their trade (Acts 19).

**Justice, mercy and forgiveness**

God's desire for mercy and justice come together in the work of Jesus. Naturally, justice and mercy are contradictory, but God reconciles these in Christ. God is *abounding in love ... yet does not leave the guilty unpunished* (Exodus 34:6-7) as he himself works salvation. On the cross, Jesus was able to exercise mercy, saying: *"Father, forgive them"* (Luke 23:34) because his dying achieved justice by paying the price of sin (namely death). Therefore he could say, concerning the work of salvation: *it is finished* (John 19:30). But it was not the torture of Jesus that produced salvation, but simply that Jesus as the innocent lamb of God gave his life.

Further, forgiveness cannot apply to those who refuse mercy. In the USA in 1829, a robber called George Wilson killed a man and was sentenced to death. His friends spoke on his behalf to President Andrew Jackson, who granted a pardon, yet Wilson refused to accept the pardon! The matter was then referred to the US Supreme Court, and it ruled that a pardon depends on acceptance by the guilty person. So Wilson remained under sentence and was executed (*United States v. Wilson*, 7 Peters 150 1833).

**The year of Jubilee**

At the Nazareth synagogue, Jesus announced "the year of the Lord's favour" (Luke 4) using language from Leviticus 25 that describes the Jubilee Year (each fiftieth year) when liberty was to be declared and most property returned to its original owner. In Jesus, a liberty era is established.

Prior to the year 2000, signatories to the world's largest petition urged governments to cancel the debts owed by poor nations. This "Jubilee" project was motivated by mercy - but was not based on the biblical Jubilee, nor on biblically-defined justice: it is unjust to seek to overturn contracts made legally and freely without bearing the resulting losses. A better application of the era of God's favour is to combine mercy and justice, when ministries lend money to people who normally would not qualify for a loan, who can then buy capital to start businesses, create wealth, and manageably repay their debts. This avoids the problem of welfare fraud and dependency, and encourages dignity. Slaves purchased under such schemes are mercifully given their freedom, and can gain paid work - and so eventually repaying the cost of their purchase. This is like Paul responding to any debt owed to Philemon by the runaway slave Onesimus: *if he owes you anything ... charge it to me* (Philemon 1:18).