

Pursuing Justice
for Children and the Poor
with *Urgency and Persistence*

National Observance of
Children's Sabbaths

Seven-Day Guide
for Reflection and Prayer

By Shannon Daley-Harris



Children's Defense Fund

Children's Defense Fund

25 E Street, NW
Washington, DC 20001
(202) 628-8787
www.childrensdefense.org

Sunday: No Trivial Pursuit

Reading: Deuteronomy 16:18-20

“Justice, and only justice, shall you pursue, so that you may live and occupy the land that the Lord your God is giving you.” (Deut.16:20)

Trivial Pursuit, many of us recall, was a board game that rose to popularity in the 1980s. To win, players had to correctly answer trivia questions ranging across topics of geography, entertainment, history, sports and leisure, science, and arts and literature. There were hundreds of questions that might be asked, often causing players to rack their brains for the long-forgotten or never-known answer. The focus was indeed trivia—the unimportant, the fleeting.

Our reading today focuses our attention on the exact opposite. What we and our nation’s leaders must pursue is not a mastery of trivia, but the most important, profound, enduring, and central goal of justice. That pursuit of justice is so important that the word is repeated in our scripture verse—“justice, and only justice, shall you pursue.”

Yet so often our lives are distracted by the trivial and we lose sight of justice. And when we—as individuals, congregations, communities, elected leaders, and a nation—lose sight of God’s justice, children and families in poverty suffer.

If we are going to pursue justice as God intends, we must do so with urgency and persistence. Justice doesn’t come easily. Justice doesn’t come quickly. And so when our attention starts to wander, when our energy starts to ebb, when immediate distractions are more present than eternal commands, we must draw on each other and on God to continue our pursuit of justice. And we must keep at it until no child in our rich land lives in poverty, until every child faces a future of promise and possibility, until no child is left behind.

(Saturday *continued*)

On this weekend of the National Observance of Children’s Sabbaths, whatever your faith tradition and whatever words you use, set aside time to focus your mind, your heart, and most especially your actions to pursue justice for children and the poor with urgency and persistence.

Prayer: God of the poor, the unjustly accused, the out-spent, the immigrant, and yes, even of me, help me to step out of the busy whirlwind of my everyday life to take time to focus on you and your call to pursue justice. Refresh and renew me, too, I pray, so that I may seek justice with urgency and persistence. Amen.

My Reflections and Prayerful Commitment:

Saturday: The Sabbath and Pursuit of Justice

Reading: Exodus 23: 6-12

You shall not pervert the justice due to your poor in their lawsuits. Keep far from a false charge, and do not kill the innocent and those in the right, for I will not acquit the guilty. You shall take no bribe, for a bribe blinds the officials, and subverts the cause of those who are in the right. You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt... Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest, so that your ox and your donkey may have relief, and your homeborn slave and the resident alien may be refreshed. (Exodus 23:6-9, 12)

The National Observance of Children's Sabbaths, celebrated across religious traditions for more than 20 years, is an occasion to unite in common concern for children in need and shared commitment to pursuing justice with and for them. On the Children's Sabbath weekend, through prayer, study, and action, people of faith hear and heed the divine command to pursue justice for children and the poor throughout the years to come.

Our passage today reminds us of the seamless connection between the idea of "Sabbath" and assuring justice, especially for those in poverty, protecting those vulnerable to false charges, working for fair systems that don't advantage the wealthy, and protecting immigrants. While observing the Sabbath, or *shabbat*, is central to Judaism and other traditions, for many the term feels far from our religious practice and sits awkwardly in our mouth or on our ear. Today's passage reminds us that the purpose of observing Sabbath was essentially to assure that those who work hard to make ends meet, who labor for the benefit of others, who have the least power to protect themselves or refresh and renew have the opportunity to do so. It is an observance born out of the call to actively change our lives to focus on justice for those who need it most.

(Sunday *continued*)

Prayer: Eternal God of love and justice, I confess that it is easy to lose sight of what's important, to be distracted by the trivial rather than focused on your timeless and enduring call to justice. Pull my attention back to you and to your command to pursue justice. Grant me the persistence and sense of urgency to keep pursuing justice for children and the poor. Help me not to give up, just as you never give up on me. Amen.

My Reflections and Prayerful Commitment:

Monday: Listen to Me

Reading: Isaiah 51:1-16

“Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness, you that seek the LORD. Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug. Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you; for he was but one when I called him, but I blessed him and made him many... Listen to me, my people, and give heed to me, my nation; for a teaching will go out from me, and my justice for a light to the peoples.”
(Isa 51:1-2, 4 NRSV)

“Listen to me.” What exasperated parent hasn’t ground out those words to a child who has not been paying attention? The words can be said as stern instruction; I’m not messing around here.

“Listen to me.” What child hasn’t cried out those words with urgent pleading when his or her parents have been inattentive? The words can be said with helpless frustration, a sense of being a small voice not heard by the bigger and more powerful.

“Listen to me.” They are words that may be said by any one of us when what we are about to say is important, needs to be heard and understood deeply, seriously.

“Listen” is different than “hear.” Hearing only suggests that the sound is reaching one’s ear; listening suggests that one is paying attention, taking in what is being said.

Who does the prophet want to listen? Those who pursue righteousness, those who seek God. As we prepare our hearts and minds for the Children’s Sabbath focused on pursuing justice with urgency and persistence, let us listen to these prophetic words.

(Friday *continued*)

Perhaps in those words lie the source of the prophet’s persistence—and God’s— and it may serve as prompt to our own. Hope, faith, love, and confidence in forgiveness call us to persist even when it seems hopeless, to persist even when we do not understand the big picture, to persist even when we feel like there aren’t enough of us in the movement, to persist even when critics question our actions. All we can do, with hope, faith, love, and trust in forgiveness, is to seek to hear and heed God’s call to proclaim and pursue justice—doing it early, daily, eagerly, and repeatedly.

Prayer: God, grant me hope, faith, love, and sure knowledge of your forgiveness so that I may persist faithfully in seeking justice for children and those in poverty as you would have me. Amen.

My Reflections and Prayerful Commitment:

Friday: Persistence

Reading: Jeremiah 7:21-28

From the day that your ancestors came out of the land of Egypt until this day, I have persistently sent all my servants the prophets to them, day after day; yet they did not listen to me, or pay attention, but they stiffened their necks. They did worse than their ancestors did. (Jer 7:25-26 NRSV)

Jeremiah was very persistent in pointing out his and God's persistence! Ten times the prophet uses a form of the Hebrew root [škm] to describe how he has spoken to the people or how God has sent the prophets to the people. Translated in the New Revised Standard Version, "persistently," the word comes from a Hebrew root that means to do something daily—early, eagerly, and repeatedly.

Jeremiah's frustration and sense of futility is heard as he describes "warning them persistently," (11:7), reminds that he has "spoken persistently" (25:3), notes that God has "persistently sent you all his servants the prophets" (25:4, 29:19), and protests, "I have taught them persistently" (32:23).

So why persist? Why didn't the prophet give up? Why didn't God? Why shouldn't we?

Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote, "*Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime; therefore, we are saved by hope. Nothing true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore, we are saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore, we are saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as from our own; therefore, we are saved by the final form of love, which is forgiveness.*" (H. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*)

(Monday continued)

Listen! What does God want us to remember as we pursue justice and righteousness? Our heritage, our ancestors, our parents: do we recognize in them faithfulness, God's sure blessing even as they ventured to unknown places? Do we remember that in the most barren times, lost in the wilderness, that God has always been able to bring new life and a way out of no way? Listen and heed: God's *justice* is a light for us, showing us the way forward.

Prayer: Dear God, I know you listen when I turn to you in prayer. Tune my ear and heart to listen for your word to me. Help me this day and every day to listen to children—to hear their needs, hopes, hurts, and perspective. Help me to hear and heed your call to do justice. Amen.

My Reflections and Prayerful Commitment:

Tuesday: In Good Company

Reading: Zechariah 7:8-8:17

“Thus says the LORD of hosts: Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another. But they refused to listen, and turned a stubborn shoulder, and stopped their ears in order not to hear.” (Zechariah 7:9-11 NRSV)

We are known by the company we keep. We might say that God too is known by the company God keeps—those whom God holds especially close and demands that we take special care to protect and not harm: the widow, the orphan, the alien, and the poor. That is, the company God keeps, those whom God holds especially close, are parents in the most economically precarious circumstances; the most vulnerable children; the immigrant or stranger without a community of care or kin; and the poor. Do we?

The command not to oppress these most vulnerable comes sandwiched between God’s instructions for how to treat each other, those we are already close to: “show kindness and mercy to one another” and “do not devise evil in your hearts against one another.”

How we treat those we are closest to is important, as is how we treat those in circumstances unlike our own. We are called to outward actions of care as well as inward emotions that are good and true.

What would such a seamless and authentic life look like today? How would our life as an individual, a family, or a community of faith be different if we regarded our care of children and families in dire or difficult circumstances as following on or flowing from our kindness toward the

(Thursday *continued*)

God sends God’s servants, these prophets, “urgently.” What’s the rush? Why the urgency, especially if it is to bring “bad news”? Because we can’t get to bringing good news to the poor if we don’t first recognize that we have lost our way, that there is bad news that needs to change. Nobody enjoys bad news, but it is an urgent, important first step in the prophetic message we are called to proclaim and the just change we are to make.

So here’s the bad news: Today in our rich nation, 16.4 million children are living in poverty. Right now. It is urgent that we proclaim that bad news because poverty harms children and we have the capacity to change it.

Prayer: God of mercy, open my eyes and ears to the bad news of injustice, of children in pain and families in poverty, so that I may work for change and help to bring good news to the poor, release to the captive, and recovery of sight to the blind. Amen.

My Reflections and Prayerful Commitment:

Thursday: The Urgency of Bad News

Reading: Jeremiah 26:1-24

Thus says the LORD: Stand in the court of the LORD's house, and speak to all the cities of Judah that come to worship in the house of the LORD; speak to them all the words that I command you; do not hold back a word. It may be that they will listen, all of them, and will turn from their evil way, that I may change my mind about the disaster that I intend to bring on them because of their evil doings. You shall say to them: Thus says the LORD: If you will not listen to me, to walk in my law that I have set before you, and to heed the words of my servants the prophets whom I send to you urgently—though you have not heeded—then I will make this house like Shiloh, and I will make this city a curse for all the nations of the earth. (Jer 26: 2-6 NRSV)

The musical *The Wiz*, a Seventies' adaptation of *The Wizard of Oz* featuring Michael Jackson and Diana Ross, had one song in which the Evillene, the Wicked Witch of the West, commands, "Don't nobody bring me no bad news!" That desire not to hear bad news is evidently an age-old characteristic. In today's reading, God, speaking through the prophet Jeremiah, addresses with exasperation the religious leadership—priests and prophets—and the people. All of them had resisted hearing or heeding the urgent divine message calling them to change. Their first reaction to the "bad news" Jeremiah brought them was to declare that they would kill him. Only after Jeremiah pointed out that it was God's word, not his own, that he brought did some of the leaders recall earlier prophets who had also called on the nation to change its ways—such as Micah who had spoken God's requirement only to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.

(Tuesday *continued*)

children closest to us? How would our life as an individual, family, or community of faith be different if we ensured continuity between our outward demonstrations of kindness and our inward emotions?

Prayer: Dear God, help me to listen to you. Turn me to you, unstop my ears, and help me to show kindness to those close to me, to protect and keep from oppression those in challenging circumstances, and move in me so that my heart gladly mirrors my actions. Amen.

My Reflections and Prayerful Commitment:

Wednesday: The Cause of the Poor

Reading: Psalm 72

“Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a king’s son. May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice. May the mountains yield prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness. May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor.” (Psalm 72:1-4 NRSV)

The two stained glass windows appeared on the salvage store’s website among other items rescued from buildings before demolition. One angel bore the banner “Work.” The other angel held aloft the banner “Pray.” They were, appropriately, only available for purchase as a pair, bringing to mind the familiar saying, “Work as if it all depends on you; pray as if it all depends on God.”

Psalm 72 begins with a focus on the kind of leader the nation needs—one who will lead with justice and righteousness, defending those who are in poverty, rescuing those in greatest need, stopping the powerful who would take advantage of those who were vulnerable. It is a wonderful charge and describes the qualities and priorities that we should expect from our leaders today. It seems right to expect and pray for that kind of leadership from those who guide our nation and set its direction and priorities.

But the psalmist reminds us that as hard as we work—as if it all depends on us, and as much as we hold up expectations for our nation’s leadership—that they too will work hard for justice, the power and glory and praise are God’s alone. The psalm, which began with a prayer for the nation’s leader, concludes, “Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, who alone does wondrous things. Blessed be [God’s] glorious name forever; may [God’s] glory fill the whole earth. Amen and Amen.” (Psalm 72-18-19 NRSV)

(Wednesday *continued*)

And so we are called to work for justice and righteousness as if it all depends on us, and to pray as if it all depends on God who alone does wondrous things.

Prayer: Glorious God, fill me and our nation’s leadership with your justice and righteousness. Inspire and empower me to work hard to defend children and families in poverty and to protect children from those who would oppress them. Keep me mindful that ultimately it is you alone who do wondrous things. Help me to work and to pray for the world you intend. Amen.

My Reflections and Prayerful Commitment: