

## **Justice and Those with Less**

by  
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It was my first job and I had to rent the basement of a strangely configured rental house from a slum landlord. A provision in my rental agreement included free utilities. As winter approached, I learned that meant my home never got above 60 degrees. I had to buy a space heater to stay warm but I had to turn it off before I fell asleep because the wiring inside was an accident waiting to happen. As you might suspect, my landlord never returned my calls.

One morning I went to reach for a cereal box inside my cupboard. Something fell to the floor. I stood frozen in disbelief. It was a dead rat. I looked up inside the cupboard and saw a hole that probably lead to rat heaven.

I was fortunate. I had saved enough money in five months to get out of that hole. My neighbors in the building, some with children were not so fortunate.

The rental agreement allowed me to get out of the lease with 30 days notice. I paid for the 30 days in advance, forwarded my new address to my former landlord and moved to another apartment.

When I never received my security deposit which was two months rent, I became enraged. I knew nothing about the legal system but I knew I had to seek justice. I scrounged up my last \$60 to file a claim in small claims court.

At the hearing, the landlord told the judge that I had left the place in shambles. He came with receipts of all the improvements he had to make. For the second time within three months, I stood frozen in disbelief staring at a rat.

The judge asked me if I could prove that I did not leave the place in disarray. I never anticipated this. I was incredibly naive. I simply told him that I did not. The judge chided me for being unprepared as he ruled in favor of the landlord. But the injustice was not over.

The landlord announced that he was counter-suing me. I didn't know this was possible. It was like something out of the twilight zone. The judge then heard the landlord's case against me. It was outrageous. I managed to survive the counter-suit only because I had all my cancelled checks with me.

Adding insult to injury, I brought my little brother who was visiting me to the hearing. I wanted him to understand the importance of standing up for what was right. Instead he witnessed my humiliation. His eyes were riveted on the judge and the landlord as they laughed together on the way to lunch.

It is now fifteen years later and much has changed for me. However I still harbor an uneasiness that knows that justice is not always equal for people who have less.

If you can understand why I hold a grudge against slum landlords you might also understand why many poorer people in our communities often are cynical of our legal system.

The restlessness in our inner cities is often exacerbated by the belief that if you have money or know the right people or are the right skin color, you are treated differently by our courts. Whether you believe that to be true or not, that troubling perception exists. We can either ignore that notion or work to change that perception by first having the intellectual integrity to see things as they really are instead of the way we want them to be.

There is no peace without justice. If you have been a victim of injustice, you understand. Is there a better system of justice in the world? No. Can we be more compassionate toward people with less? Yes.

When compassion exists, prejudicial differences between rich & poor and black & white greatly dissipate. Those of us in churches have a responsibility to be advocates of compassion and justice. We may not be able to save the world but if we can reach out to just one who has less, we might see through their eyes and stand beside them against injustice.



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