

Do Justice

Right now, as you read this, children are being abused, women are being trafficked for sexual exploitation, and image-bearers of God are being sold into slavery. Through social media and the twenty-four-hour news cycle, injustice looks us directly in the eye daily.

Racism, sexism, poverty, police brutality, abortion, educational inequality, mass incarceration, and much more—with so much injustice in the world, it feels overwhelming. How can we possibly respond to all these injustices? What can we do?

When it comes to justice, nobody can be an expert on every issue, but the Bible does provide wisdom to face any issue with the character and resolve that are necessary. The kingdom of God gives us the framework for pursuing justice in a world of injustice.

God's Agenda

Our ever-growing awareness of the need for justice in the face of pervasive injustice often leads to ambitious ideas: *Let's begin a movement! Let's start a nonprofit!* We may feel as if we came up with a new idea.

But God has been passionate about justice since long before you or I felt a need to get involved. Justice is God's agenda, and we get to be a part of the work that he's doing in restoring the beautiful order of his creation.

God's reign is good news for the marginalized. In fact, throughout the Old Testament, we see God's heart for the poor, the fatherless, immigrants, and widows. These were the most vulnerable people in society and were often taken advantage of or forgotten. But God has not forgotten them. The Scriptures tell us he is the "father of the fatherless", the husband to the widow, the provider for the poor, and the refuge for the immigrant.

And this is not merely an Old Testament idea, as if God shifted his attention in the New Testament to purely spiritual matters. God is unchanging, and his concern for the downtrodden is revealed even more deeply in the coming of Christ.

In fact, Jesus was born *fatherless* into a poor family, immediately became an *immigrant*, and was eventually most likely the son of a *widow*. In the Old Testament, God identified with the marginalized—in the New Testament, he became one of them.

So justice is God's agenda. But how does God execute justice? Well, God usually brings about justice through his justified people.

The Lord is the one who watches over the sojourners, but he also commands his people to care for the sojourners. The Lord upholds the widow and fatherless, and he does so through a people who care for the widow and fatherless. God is the advocate for the poor, and he calls his people to speak up on their behalf. God reigns through his people.

The call to be a people of justice is proclaimed beautifully by the prophet Micah. He asks the people of God, “What does the Lord require of you?”, then gives them a clear answer:

*To do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God.*

Justice is not merely a suggestion or a good idea; it is a requirement from God and God's word for *all* of God's people. The call to do justice is not an optional add-on for a few socially minded, passionate Christians. If God is passionate about something, then indifference is not an option for us. God cares about justice, and because he's the God of justice, we are called to be a people of justice.

Reflect

When you see or experience injustice, what is your gut reaction or first response? How does God's approach to justice—equity, order, beauty—challenge what you see in yourself?

What is Justice?

The kingdom call to justice was a clear part of Christ's ministry. In Matthew 4, Jesus proclaimed "the gospel of the kingdom," then, in the next chapter, immediately taught his disciples the ethics of the kingdom with the most well-known sermon of all time. Typically known as the Sermon on the Mount, it is a vision of how God's people live under God's reign.

In the kingdom of God, people love their enemies rather than hate them, always keep their word, and are generous to the poor. In the kingdom, God's mercy and justice are shown through a people who reflect the heart of their king. Our call to justice is not simply about championing an issue, but rather embodying a kingdom.

If the Lord is a God of justice and his people are called to be a community of justice, then we need to make sure we understand what justice means. While Western society thinks of justice in predominantly legal terms, the Hebrew understanding of justice was a vision of beautiful order in all of life.

For the Jewish people, justice was not merely legal—it was personal, relational, social, global, and even cosmic. The biblical understanding of justice can be understood through two key concepts: **equity** and **order**.

Equity

The Hebrew word for justice—*mishpat*—refers to treating people equitably, regardless of their race, gender, socioeconomic status, or ability to contribute to society. *Mishpat* is giving someone what they deserve, whether punishment or protection. That it is done equitably is at the heart of justice.

If two people deserve the same wage, but one gets less because of their gender, this is a violation of *mishpat*. If two people deserve punishment, but one is excused because they are a part of a wealthy family, this is a violation of *mishpat*.

Order

In addition to equity, justice also entails order. The biblical vision of justice is not merely about maintaining order in the legal system but in the way the world works. Harvard professor Elaine Scarry observed that while beauty and justice might seem to be opposite concepts, they are actually not that different.

If one tries to define each, they will end up using similar words, such as *order*, *symmetry*, and *clarity*. That's why the English word *fair* can mean either "just" or "beautiful." One could say "that trial was fair" or "that dress was the fairest of all." God cares about justice because it's the beautiful order meant for the world that he created out of love.

A Key to Flourishing

Justice is a beautiful vision of equity and order in the world. *Equity* is all people getting what they deserve, whether protection or punishment and *order* is a vision of the rightful harmony and flourishing of the world. These definitions provide us with a positive vision of justice, one which is not simply about punishing wrongdoing but also about promoting that which contributes to harmony and flourishing.

Living a just life entails more than avoiding breaking the law. It means seeking the very things the law is there to protect. Murder is an injustice, but justice also calls for acknowledging the dignity of all human life. Stealing is an injustice, but justice calls for generosity to those in need. Slavery is an injustice, but justice calls for pursuing and protecting freedom for all.

The idea of justice is very appealing to our culture today. It is popular to march for equality and fight against oppression. But there isn't merely one idea of justice out there, as if we all agree on what justice is and simply need to achieve it. No. We all long for justice, but whose version of justice?

For many years, most Americans agreed on the basic principles of right and wrong and, while those principles broadly agreed with Christian principles, consensus on moral principles did not mean actual or equally distributed justice. Agreement alone cannot create equity or order.

Today there's an entirely new morality. According to this ethic, tolerance is the highest virtue, and denying yourself is the unforgivable sin. This new morality isn't just some slight adjustment to Christian ethics; it is a different framework altogether.

It's time for Christians to own up to the fact that we have a unique ethic shaped by life under God's reign. We all want human flourishing, but we have different understandings of what that means and how to achieve it. One of the most important ways that Christians can help define and contribute to the common good is by

teaching and upholding the foundational idea that all people are made in the image of God.

Reflect

Meditate on Ephesians 2:1-5. How does God's mercy and grace shape how you relate to other image-bearers of God?

Driven by Dignity

Justice entails giving people their due, whether punishment or protection, but what is their due? What do all people deserve? Christians believe that because all people are made in the image of God, all people are therefore worthy of dignity, value, and respect.

When it comes to dignity, the key question is: *Why* do all people have dignity and deserve certain rights? The equality of all people might sound like an obvious, self-evident truth, but it's not.

Many cultures do not believe in the equality of all people. Throughout history (and still today), many cultures determined or determine dignity based on race, gender, socioeconomic status, the family one is born into, or how much a person contributes to society. There's no standard unit of measure for being human, no clear way to prove that all people are created equal. History certainly does not attest to the idea that all people are created equal.

Why, then, do Christians believe that all people have dignity and deserve certain rights? *Genesis 1:27* summarizes it most famously: "In the image of God he created them, male and female he created them". Dignity is not something that has to be earned or achieved; it is bestowed by God as a fact of every human being. As John Perkins says, "You don't give people dignity . . . you affirm it."

The dignity and equality of all people are uniquely biblical ideas. If it feels self-evident to you that all people are created equal, that's probably because you live in a society shaped by the biblical view that all people are made in God's image.

This recognition of the dignity and value of all human life is on display in Scripture as it shows us God's heart is for the unborn, those with special needs, immigrants, orphans, our enemies, and the elderly. In other words, we're not allowed to pick and choose whose dignity we defend. Seeking justice only for people who look like you is the greatest injustice.

God gives a vision of seeking justice for all, from the womb to the tomb.

Sadly, many people today divide over whose dignity to defend. Some fight for the dignity of the unborn but don't recognize the image of God in the immigrant (and vice versa). Christians are called to be a people who see the image of God in the unborn, the mentally or physically disabled, the immigrant, the widow, the poor, the

prisoner, the elderly and—for that matter—the rich, the healthy, the happy, the young, and the free.

And not only do we acknowledge different facets of human brokenness, but we take notice of their connectedness. For example, many who age out of the foster care system become homeless. And shortly after becoming homeless, most will be approached by a trafficker. A disproportionately high percent will at some point become incarcerated. So if you want to address homelessness, trafficking, and mass incarceration, you have to give attention to the foster care system. All brokenness is connected and calls for holistic healing and redemption.

Acknowledging the dignity of all people reshapes the way we think about justice and mercy. We are no longer driven primarily by people's needs, but by their dignity.

In other words, when I see someone sleeping on the street, I see them as an image-bearer of God more than as a "homeless person."

When a teenage girl gets pregnant, I do not see her and her child as problems to be dealt with, but as people to be loved.

Even when someone is being cruel to me, I am called to see the image of God in them before I focus on their wrongful actions.

This dignity-driven approach enables us to acknowledge people's needs without defining them by their needs and reminds us that we're never merely talking about "issues"—we're talking about people, image-bearers of God who are worthy of respect.

Reflect

Think of a time when you received mercy or justice from others. How did this impact you? Take time to thank God, ask him what keeps you from showing mercy and justice to those around you.

Driven by Grace

Most people know that Jesus came to bring love and mercy, but few recognize that he also came to bring justice. In Isaiah 42, the Lord describes the Messiah's mission this way: "I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations." The hope of Israel was that a Messiah would come and restore the beautiful order of God's creation.

When Jesus began his ministry, he made clear that he was this Messiah who would establish justice, saying in Luke 4:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor...He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind...to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Jesus embodied justice throughout his life and ultimately displayed it in the most shocking way. He brought about justice, not by punishing the wicked, but by taking their place. On the cross he who was righteous and just died in the place of the wicked and cruel.

The judge took the place of the judged. The just died for the unjust. Why? To make us righteous. To make us just. In God's wisdom, he made a way to justify his people and show forth the glory of his own justice.

Sadly, among Christians today there is a divide between those who champion the gospel and those who fight for justice. Some Christians are passionate about social issues such as racism, mass incarceration, and poverty, but they can focus so heavily on social action that they allow it to eclipse the gospel. Others are so focused on the good news of grace that they ignore the clear call of Scripture toward justice.

How should we respond to this perceived dichotomy between the gospel and social justice? At the most basic level, we have to resist pendulum-swinging reductionism and uphold both proclaiming the gospel and seeking justice because both are clearly biblical mandates.

This upholding is not a balancing act, but instead requires a proper relationship between them. In short, the gospel creates a people who seek mercy and justice. Why? Because the gospel gives us eyes to see others the way God does, and gives

us new hearts that motivate us to be involved in the work of justice that God is doing.

The gospel gets to the heart, drawing us to God and into God's mission. The more we understand the gospel, the more we are drawn into Christ's heart for the oppressed and hurting.

The interconnectedness of the gospel and justice, although often missed today, has been upheld throughout the history of the church. Building on teachings of the Reformers and the Puritans, Tim Keller writes:

If a person has grasped the meaning of God's grace in his heart, he will do justice. If he doesn't live justly, then he may say with his lips that he is grateful for God's grace, but in his heart he is far from him. If he doesn't care about the poor, it reveals that at best he doesn't understand the grace he has experienced, and at worst he has not really encountered the saving mercy of God. Grace should make you just.

Throughout Scripture, we see that a true encounter with the grace of God leads to a sacrificial heart for the marginalized and oppressed. Doing justice is not the reason you receive grace, but it most certainly will be a result of receiving grace. Faith produces works.

In other words, the good news that we are justified by grace becomes the motivation for seeking justice for the oppressed. Seeking justice doesn't replace the gospel, but it should flow from a heart that is transformed by the gospel. The proclamation of the gospel must be accompanied with the demonstration of mercy and justice.

A Life of Justice

Feeling overwhelmed when talking about injustice is normal. Homelessness, sex trafficking, and racism are complex and do not have easy solutions. The weight of it all can lead to paralysis. But while you may not be able to do everything, you can do something. Here are four basic action steps for being a part of the solution:

1. Listen

There's a time to speak and a time to listen. Sadly, Christians are better known for the former than the latter. But to be a people of justice, we must learn to listen, especially to the victims of injustice.

One of the most dignifying things you can do for a person is to listen to their story and acknowledge their experience. Dietrich Bonhoeffer called this the "ministry of listening." He said that when we listen to one another, we are God's ears to others. People feel known and heard by God when they are known and heard by his people.

If you want to be a part of holistic justice, start listening to stories of injustice. Ask an immigrant about their experience in America. Ask a single mom what it's like in her position. Ask someone how their ethnicity informs their faith.

2. Learn

In our pursuit of justice, we will only advance as far as our empathy takes us. *Sympathy* is feeling compassion for someone who is hurting, but *empathy* is caring enough to enter into their pain. It means trying to understand what someone is going through from their perspective.

That's why we have to be informed if we want to be involved in the work of justice. Read books. Watch documentaries. Ask questions. Never stop learning.

There is a lot of uninformed passion in our culture today. Social media allows anyone to publish their opinions to the world, even if those ideas are undeveloped, unfiltered, and unhelpful.

It's easy to get caught up in a cultural wave of moral outrage and finger-pointing when we don't really know what we're talking about and have not examined our own hearts. But to truly seek justice, we must commit to learning the complexity of issues and understanding the problems before we try to provide a solution.

3. Speak

After listening and learning, we need to speak up. *Proverbs 31:8–9* says, “Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute. Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.”

We are called to be a voice for the marginalized, to advocate for the oppressed, and to use our influence or platform to expose injustice and point people to grace and truth. Call out racism or sexism when you see it. Champion those who flourish in a way that leads to the flourishing of others.

When we speak up, it must not simply be to make it clear to others that we’re right and they’re wrong. Speaking truth is necessary, but one of the most powerful forms of truth-telling is confession. On many social issues, before we bring our *apologetics* we may need to bring our *apologies*, before we defend our faith we may need to be honest about where we’ve been inconsistent in our faith.

The church hasn’t always been faithful to Scripture in addressing racism and sexism, in its use of power, or in matters of financial integrity. Before we can be a part of the solution, we have to own up to the ways in which we’ve been a part of the problem. We must acknowledge the sins of our fathers, as Nehemiah 9 puts it, and take responsibility to bring change today.

4. Act

Finally, *Proverbs 21:3* says, “To do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice.” In other words, God doesn’t want your religious affection if it doesn’t overflow into a life of justice. We are called to act, and that can mean many different things beyond listening, learning, and speaking—which are powerful actions themselves.

Build relationships with people who don’t look like you, raise awareness for overlooked-but-important issues, defend the weak, pray for the oppressed, create conversations, vote according to your conscience within the bounds of Scripture, and live in a way that shows that you are following the king who came to bring justice.

We spend so much of our lives tiring ourselves with things that won’t really matter in the long run. But when we encounter Christ and his grace, he gives us a whole new

mission and purpose. We no longer live for ourselves. We now live for the kingdom of God.

And while this mission is centered on Christ and his glory, it encompasses every aspect of our lives. Christianity is personal but it is not private. In the words of Cornel West, “Justice is what Love looks like in public.” The truths of the gospel shape public life, social life—all of life!

Jesus is making the world fair again—in every sense of the word. He created the ultimate justice through the ultimate mercy so we can reflect his image and his beauty by seeking justice for the oppressed and mercy for hurting.