

tearfund USA

Session 1 What is Justice?



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GLOBAL EDITION

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Session One

What is Biblical

Justice? A Theology of Justice

“If you are trying to live a life in accordance with the Bible, the concept and call to justice are inescapable.”
- Tim Keller

“Part of living justly is recognising that the decisions we make affect not only the people around us but communities and environments around the world. We must live our lives and make choices with that in mind.”
- Kimberly Hunt

Definitions

Biblical Justice: The condition and action required for the state of wholeness and flourishing due all of God's creation.

Shalom: Hebrew word for peace, completeness, and wholeness. Where there is justice, there will be shalom.

Jubilee: Every fifty years, the Israelites were to partake in a year of celebration and liberation. They would restore lands, property and property rights to original owners, and slaves were set free.

***Doing Justice Is Never That Simple by Mari Williams**

A church in a very affluent part of a big city decided to start a project to help people in a much poorer area of the city. They arranged a church meeting to discuss the needs of the poorer community. They didn't know anyone from the community, nor did they think to ask what their needs might be, but they decided that food was surely a priority for them. The church would donate food to the poor community, so that parents could feed their children.

A project team was formed. They bought food, packed it into boxes and delivered the food parcels once a week to homes in the poorer area. The team would knock on people's doors and greet them with big smiles, a food parcel, and assurances of God's love for them.

On the whole, the adults seemed very grateful, if a little embarrassed, and the children were extremely excited. At Christmas time, the church decided to buy gifts for the children. They held a special collection so that they could really bless the children with expensive toys. The team was surprised that some of the fathers looked somewhat taken aback by this gesture, but the children were so very happy when they received the gifts.

The project was going extremely well. Or so it seemed to the affluent church.

*Story adapted from Corbett, Steve., and Brian Fikkert. When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor-- and Yourself. Chicago, Ill.: Moody Publishers, 2009.

In actual fact, the project was unintentionally contributing to a deep seated sense of shame and lack of worth amongst people in the poor community. Many of the adults in the community wanted to work, but struggled to find employment. Their self esteem was already low. Being given handouts, without any sense of ownership, choice or involvement, attacked their dignity and self-worth further. Some of the fathers had worked hard to save money to be able to buy their children small gifts at Christmas. But when they saw the church's expensive gift, they knew their gift would look small and insignificant in comparison.

The church's response was driven by compassion, but it was a simplistic, knee-jerk reaction to injustice that didn't tackle the real issues and actually made things worse.

Imagine if the church had asked the community what their needs were and whether there was any way that they could partner together to begin to address them? If food was a priority need, imagine if they had worked with the community to set up a food cooperative owned and run by those who would use it, empowering people and building self-sufficiency. Imagine if the church had gotten into the much more complex but dignifying work of listening to the community, working with people to help them find employment and presenting opportunities for them to provide for their families?

God Loves Justice

by Nicholas Wolterstorff

What the Hebrew and Christian scriptures have to say about justice functions for many people nowadays mainly as a source of golden nuggets of rhetoric - if it functions for them at all. Who could improve on the following if one is urging the importance of doing justice:

"Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!" - Amos 5:23-24

or this:

"He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." - Micah 6:8

What scripture says about justice is more than "nuggets" of wisdom. There is a clear way of thinking about justice in the scriptures - and what those writings say about justice is an inextricable component of the message. Pull out justice, and everything unravels.

Some of the skeptics of justice in scripture are secularists who have gotten the impression that christianity is all about love and not about justice. But a good many are Christians who have not so much gotten the impression that christianity is all about love and not about justice, but are committed to interpreting scripture solely through the lens of love. And then there are those who concede that scripture speaks of justice but assume that it refers to kings and courts in the administration of justice. When I say that justice is an inextricable component of the biblical message, I have in mind primary justice.

There are two different kinds of justice in scripture: primary justice and reactive justice.

Reactive justice punishes the wrongdoer, condemns the wrongdoer, is perhaps angry at the wrongdoer, and so forth - reacting to one's wrongdoing. Reactive justice renders justice to a wrongdoer.

What that implies, obviously, is that reactive justice is relevant when someone has wronged someone else, when someone has treated another person unjustly. And what that implies, in turn, is that **reactive justice cannot be the only kind of justice. There has to be another** kind of justice, a kind of justice such that, when someone violates this other kind of justice, and is thus a wrongdoer, reactive justice becomes relevant.

I am going to call it primary justice. Reactive justice becomes relevant when there has been a violation of primary justice.

God loves primary justice. God has a heart for primary justice. God is devoted to justice. So it comes as no surprise that God says: "Seek justice; do justice; let justice roll down like waters; imitate me in loving justice". But is God speaking of reactive justice, reserved for courts, kings, and judges, or primary justice, which applies to all people? I believe that, in many cases, these scriptures are speaking of primary justice.

MISHPAT & TSEDEQA

The Hebrew word in the Old Testament that is usually translated into English as justice is "mispat". The term is often paired with "tsedeqa", standardly translated as "righteousness". Together they are often translated as "justice and righteousness" in the Old Testament and simply "righteousness" in the New Testament. My own sense is that, when the rhetorical context permits, "tsedeqa" is better rendered into present-day English as the right thing, going right, or doing right. The word righteous is almost never used any more in ordinary speech, and when it is, it suggests a person intensely preoccupied with his own moral character who has few sins to his debit. The connotation is self righteousness. **The pairing of "mispat" and "tsedeqa" is better** translated as primary justice or simply "justice" than as "justice and righteousness" or simply "righteousness."

Scripture teaches that what God wants for God's human family is what the Old Testament writers called, in Hebrew, shalom. "Shalom" is

almost always translated as “peace” in our English Bibles. I think that is a very poor translation. Shalom is much more than peace. Shalom is flourishing. What God desires for us is that we flourish in all dimensions of our existence.

And now for the point relevant to our purposes here: when you read what the biblical writers say about shalom, it soon becomes clear that shalom requires justice. In the absence of justice, we are not truly flourishing; in the absence of justice, shalom is impaired. Shalom goes beyond justice; but always shalom includes justice. Justice is, you might say, the ground floor of shalom. So once again: why does God love justice? Because God loves shalom, and shalom includes justice.

When the kingdom of God has come in its fullness there will be no breaches of primary justice, hence no reactive justice; all justice will be primary justice. You and I are to imitate God by also having a heart for justice.

Read Isaiah 61 Together

The Year of the Lord's Favor

- 1 The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,
 because the Lord has anointed me
 to proclaim good news to the poor.
 He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
 to proclaim freedom for the captives
 and release from darkness for the prisoners,
- 2 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor
 and the day of vengeance of our God,
 to comfort all who mourn,
- 3 and provide for those who grieve in Zion -
 to bestow on them a crown of beauty
 instead of ashes,
 the oil of joy
 instead of mourning,
 and a garment of praise
 instead of a spirit of despair.
 They will be called oaks of righteousness,
 a planting of the Lord
 for the display of his splendor.
- 4 They will rebuild the ancient ruins
 and restore the places long devastated;
 they will renew the ruined cities
 that have been devastated for generations.
- 5 Strangers will shepherd your flocks;
 foreigners will work your fields and vineyards.
- 6 And you will be called priests of the Lord,
 you will be named ministers of our God.
 You will feed on the wealth of nations,
 and in their riches you will boast.
- 7 Instead of your shame
 you will receive a double portion,
 and instead of disgrace
 you will rejoice in your inheritance.
 And so you will inherit a double portion in your land,
 and everlasting joy will be yours.

- 8 "For I, the Lord, love justice;
I hate robbery and wrongdoing.
In my faithfulness I will reward my people
and make an everlasting covenant with them.
- 9 Their descendants will be known among the nations
and their offspring among the peoples.
All who see them will acknowledge
that they are a people the Lord has blessed."
- 10 I delight greatly in the Lord;
my soul rejoices in my God.
For he has clothed me with garments of salvation
and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness,
as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
- 11 For as the soil makes the sprout come up
and a garden causes seeds to grow,
so the Sovereign Lord will make righteousness
and praise spring up before all nations.

Questions for Discussion

1. What is God's definition of justice?
2. Why do you think Jesus quoted this passage in his first sermon (Luke 4:18)?
3. In the absence of the year of Jubilee, how do we ensure a "reset" to undo the structural and personal sin that perpetuates oppression?
4. What is God saying to you, and what are you going to do about it?

Together

How have you defined "justice" in the past? As a small group, create a practical and biblical definition of justice. Use the reflection in this chapter, your own experiences and ideas and the Bible. You'll use this definition for the rest of your time journeying together.

Solo Work

Read Luke 4:16-21. With a knowledge of Jesus' work displayed in the Gospels, and the context of God's desire for justice detailed in Isaiah 61, explain Jesus' words, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

- How does Jesus' work on earth fulfill Isaiah 61?
- How is this session's message and discussion challenging you? Are you one who knows God, but has resisted justice? Are you much more comfortable with justice but have resisted God? Journal about this. Be vulnerable. Be open. This is between you and God.

Prayer

Lord, you know my heart. If I have claimed to know you, but have resisted seeking justice, forgive me. If I have passionately sought justice, but have been detached from you, draw me near to you. Help me recognise your Spirit in me and respond to your call to seek justice.

This is the end
of Session 1.

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