

Defining Justice

One definition is “the maintenance or administration of what is just especially by the impartial adjustment of conflicting claims or the assignment of merited rewards or punishments.”

Another is “the administration of law, especially: the establishment or determination of rights according to the rules of law or equity.”

**But in God's perspective,
these definitions are incomplete.**

Justice is not only about retribution.

In its fullness,

**God's justice is about the flourishing of all
people.**

Contemporary justice systems

- in terms of retributive justice.

**This aligns with the dictionary definition of justice
= concerned with protecting innocent people and
preventing or punishing crime.**

We see God's concern for this type of justice in passages like:

- **Exodus 3:7-8 “The Lord said, “I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey...”**

Psalm 82:2-4 “How long will you defend the unjust and show partiality to the wicked?

Defend the weak and the fatherless;

uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed.

Rescue the weak and the needy;

deliver them from the hand of the wicked.”

But more than his legal concern for retributive justice, we see God's concern for distributive justice [rewards are shared by all members], which can be defined as "Justice and Righteousness" as "fairness and flourishing for everybody.

Leviticus 25:8-55, as God gives instructions for the year of Jubilee

- **And ye shall bless the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof: it shall be a jubilee unto you; and you shall return every man unto his possession, and you shall return every man unto his family.**

Psalm 146:7-8, which describes God's care for the oppressed, the poor, and others who are righteous but in need

Psalm 146: 7-8

7 He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets prisoners free,

**8 the LORD gives sight to the blind, the LORD lifts up those who are bowed down,
the LORD loves the righteous.**

Matthew 5-7, when Jesus teaches his disciples and the crowds in his Sermon on the Mount

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

**Psalm 33:5, Jeremiah 9:24, Amos 5:24, and more,
when justice is repeatedly paired with righteousness .**

**Psalm 33:5: The Lord loves righteousness and justice;
the earth is full of his unfailing love.**

Jeremiah 9:24

But those who wish to boast should boast in this alone: that they truly know me and understand that I am the LORD who demonstrates unfailing love and who brings justice and righteousness to the earth, and that I delight in these things. I, the LORD, have spoken!

Justice and God's Kingdom

From God's perspective, justice is more than amending wrongs or getting what's rightfully ours.

That is why Christians find it necessary to specify biblical justice when talking about justice.

Biblical justice is distinct; it's the justice we find described in the Bible, where God established what true justice is, and which often calls us to go above and beyond what our civil law and dictionary definitions require.

But if we strive for biblical justice in our everyday life and as we begin to see the fairness and flourishing God intended for his creation.

Biblical justice involves making individuals, communities, and the cosmos whole, by upholding both goodness and impartiality. It stands at the centre of true religion, according to James, who says that the kind of "religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world" (James 1:27). Earlier Scripture says, "The righteous care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern" (Prov. 29:7). Justice flows from God's heart and character. As true and good, God seeks to make the object of his holy love whole.

Isaiah 51:4-5

4 “Listen to me, my people; hear me, my nation: Instruction will go out from me; my justice will become a light to the nations.

5 My righteousness draws near speedily, my salvation is on the way, and my arm will bring justice to the nations.

The islands will look to me and wait in hope for my arm.

Psalms 33:5

The LORD loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of his unfailing love.

Amos 5:24

But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!

Hosea 12:6

But you must return to your God; maintain love and justice, and wait for your God always.

Proverbs 28:5

**Evildoers do not understand what is right,
but those who seek the LORD understand it fully.**

Isaiah 30:18

Yet the LORD longs to be gracious to you; therefore he will rise up to show you compassion. For the LORD is a God of justice. Blessed are all who wait for him!

Micah 6:8

**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.**

Isaiah 1:17

Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow.

Psalms 106:3

Blessed are those who act justly, who always do what is right.

Zechariah 7:9

“This is what the LORD Almighty said: ‘Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another.

Deuteronomy 16:20

Follow justice and justice alone, so that you may live and possess the land the LORD your God is giving you.

Proverbs 29:7

The righteous care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern.

Matthew 5:38-39

38 “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’

39 But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also.

1. The God of Justice

Biblical justice is not first of all a set of bullet points or a set of rules and guidelines. It is rooted in the very character of God and it is the outworking of that character, which is never less than just.

In the Bible, God's justice is both retributive and reparative. It not only punishes evildoing, but it restores those who are victims of injustice.

The Facets of Justice

These basic themes work themselves out in four facets of biblical justice.

Biblical justice is characterized by:

radical generosity,

universal equality,

life-changing advocacy, and

asymmetrical responsibility.

GENEROSITY

The first facet of biblical justice is radical generosity.

While secular individualism says that your money belongs to you, and socialism says your money belongs to the State, the Bible says that all your money belongs to God, who then entrusts it to you (1 Chronicles 29:14; 1 Corinthians 4:7).

In Luke 16:1-16, Jesus calls us to be wise stewards of our wealth. A steward was the manager of an estate under its owner, making him both a master and yet a servant. So our wealth belongs to us and yet does not belong to us.

GENEROSITY

One place we see these two dimensions is in the Mosaic law itself. Theft is always an injustice, for to take someone's money or goods is to trample on their property rights.

And yet many laws show us that these property rights are not absolute. The Sabbath year law required that every seventh year all debts were cancelled (Deuteronomy 15:7-10).

An even more radical law was the law of the "Jubilee" year. Every 50 years, the land went back to its original allotments (Leviticus 25:8-55). On average, each person or family would have a once-in-a-lifetime chance to start over, no matter how deeply into debt they had fallen.

EQUALITY

A second facet of biblical justice is universal equality. Biblical justice requires that every person be treated according to the same standards and with the same respect, regardless of class, race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, or of any other social category. Leviticus 19:15 says: “You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor.” Deuteronomy 16:19 says: “You shall not show partiality, and you shall not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of the righteous.” [19]

EQUALITY

Jesus shocked the social sensibilities of the day by receiving and treating all classes of people with equal love and respect. Samaritans were seen by the Jews as racial inferiors, yet twice Jesus places Samaritans on the same spiritual level as the Jews (Luke 9:54; 17:16). Jesus touched off a riot when he declared that God loved Gentiles, such as the widow of Zarephath and Naaman the Syrian (Luke 4:25-27), as much as Jews. Jesus reached out to lepers who were social outcasts, touching them and defying the contemporary social prohibitions (Luke 5:12-16; 17:11-19).

ADVOCACY

A third facet of biblical justice is significant, life-changing advocacy for the poor. Psalm 41:1 says, “Blessed is the one who gives active consideration to the weak and the poor.” [27] The word translated “consideration” means believers are to pay close attention to the weak and the poor, seeking to understand the causes of their condition, and to spend significant time and energy to changing their life situation. [28] “The righteous care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern” (Proverbs 29:7).

ADVOCACY

While we are to treat all equally, and not show partiality to any (Leviticus 19:15), we are to have special concern for the poor, the weak, and the powerless. Proverbs 31:8-9 says “Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves... Defend the rights (sadeqah) of the poor and needy.” Is this a contradiction? No. The Bible doesn’t say “Speak up for the rich and powerful.” It does not mean that the powerful are less important as persons before God. They certainly are equally as important. But they don’t need you to speak up for them. However, the poor do need you.

The call to advocacy assumes that the poor and the immigrant have equal rights.

Deuteronomy 24:17, 19 says: “Do not deprive the foreigner or the fatherless of justice, or take the cloak of the widow as a pledge.... When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it.

Leave it for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands...”

The call to advocacy assumes that a fact of our fallen world is a highly uneven distribution of opportunity and resources.

“The poor are shunned even by their neighbors, but the rich have many friends” (Proverbs 14:20; 19:4).

To be born into a privileged family is to automatically have “friends”—connections to people with power, immense social capital that paves the way in life.

But the poor do not have such capital.

Children in poor neighbourhoods usually grow up with inferior schooling and in an environment extremely detrimental to learning. Conservatives may argue that this is the parents’ fault while progressives will point to a failure of social policy.

But no one believes that it is the children’s fault.

They are born into a world without “friends” who can open doors for them.

RESPONSIBILITY

Fourth facet of biblical justice is responsibility - both corporate and individual.

One of the most basic definitions of justice is “giving people what they are due.”

But are we responsible only for our own sins, or are we also complicit, responsible, and involved in the sins of others as well?