



DEFINING BIBLICAL JUSTICE

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Christians all agree that the world is filled with injustice. However, there is a lot of confusion and emotion regarding the terms “justice”, “social justice”, and even “doing justice” in our current cultural climate. From the protests, the murder of black people, to the myriad of voices on social media, we are beginning to see the conflation of false ideologies with biblical principles. Many times we are also sharing terminology with secular culture. And where there is no meaningful alternative vocabulary, picking wording is difficult when it comes to communicating anything helpful. It is no wonder that there is so much misunderstanding. To this end, Imprint Church is providing this document to explain our position on biblical justice — and to clarify what we mean and do not mean when we talk about justice.

WHAT IS BIBLICAL JUSTICE?

The Bible speaks about justice hundreds of times. It is all over the Bible. In fact, in every cultural period of the Bible, we see God focused on justice both in his character, and for the desired character of His children. Here are some examples:

- He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing. Love the sojourner, therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt. (**Deuteronomy 10:18–19 ESV**)
- “If among you, one of your brothers should become poor, in any of your towns within your land that the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be.” (**Deuteronomy 15:7–8 ESV**)
- I delivered the poor who cried for help, and the fatherless who had none to help him. The blessing of him who was about to perish came upon me, and I caused the widow’s heart to sing for joy. I put on righteousness, and it clothed me; my justice was like a robe and a turban. I was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame. I was a father to the needy, and I searched out the cause of him whom I did not know. I broke the fangs of the unrighteous and made him drop his prey from his teeth. (**Job 29:12–17 ESV**)
- O LORD, you hear the desire of the afflicted; you will strengthen their heart; you will incline your ear to do justice to the fatherless and the oppressed, so



that man who is of the earth may strike terror no more. (**Psalm 10:17–18 ESV**)

- Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; steadfast love and faithfulness go before you. (**Psalm 89:14 ESV**)
- 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. (**Proverbs 31:8–9 ESV**)
- ...learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause. (**Isaiah 1:17 ESV**)
- Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? (**Isaiah 58:6–7 ESV**)
- Therefore because you trample on the poor and you exact taxes of grain from him, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not dwell in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine. For I know how many are your transgressions and how great are your sins—you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and turn aside the needy in the gate. Therefore he who is prudent will keep silent in such a time, for it is an evil time. Seek good, and not evil, that you may live; and so the LORD, the God of hosts, will be with you, as you have said. Hate evil, and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the LORD, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph... But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” (**Amos 5:11–15; 24 ESV**)
- He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (**Micah 6:8 ESV**)
- Jesus, aware of this, withdrew from there. And many followed him, and he healed them all and ordered them not to make him known. This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: “Behold, my servant whom I have chosen, my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles. He will not quarrel or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets; a bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not quench, until he brings justice to victory; and in his name the Gentiles will hope.” (**Matthew 12:15–21 ESV**)
- 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. (**Luke 4:18–19 ESV, here Jesus is quoting Isaiah 61:1-2**)

- “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!” (**Matthew 23:23–24 ESV**)
- Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (**Romans 12:16–21 ESV**)
- Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world. (**James 1:27 ESV**)
- If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. (**James 2:8–9 ESV**)

This cursory overview should show us that God’s character is just, His heart is for justice, and His calling is for Christians to adjust their lifestyles to participate in corporate and personal acts of justice. Very practically, this means that those who are following Christ should use their gifts, talents, and resources for the glory of God to relieve suffering, and to help establish culture-shaping activities that are promoting justice.

Moreover, from this overview, we can understand that the world we live in is unjust, and ever since the Fall of humanity in **Genesis 3**, the world has been overshadowed by injustice. However, God is perfectly just. And in Jesus, justice will ultimately be established in God’s Kingdom and shared with all who place their faith in Christ. In fact, this is the language that Paul uses in **Romans 3:26** to remind us that God is “just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”

The word justice has a wide range of meanings in the Bible. But we think the following represent some good and workable definitions and summaries of biblical justice:

- “Justice is one of the most outstanding attributes of God in Scripture. Time and again God is depicted as the herald of justice, especially in the

Prophets. All of God's ways are just... The righteous are called to mirror God's justice, for the Lord loves the just... Justice is often considered a synonym for fairness, but often God's justice equals not what is fair but what is right." ("Justice," Dictionary of Biblical Imagery, IVP Press)

- Justice is the "order that God seeks to reestablish in His creation where all people receive the benefits of life with Him. As love is for the NT, so justice is the central ethical idea of the OT. The prevalence of the concept is sometimes missed by the reader due to a failure to realize the wide range of meaning in the Hebrew word mishpat, particularly in passages that deal with the material and social necessities of life." ("Justice," Holman Bible Dictionary)
- "Biblical justice is the equitable and impartial application of the rule of God's moral law in society." (Dr. Tony Evans)
- "Biblical justice, from the Hebrew word mishpat, at its most basic meaning, is to treat people equitably... and give people their rights. We get more insight when we consider a second Hebrew word that can be translated as 'being just...' The word is tzadeqah, and it refers to a life of right relationships." (Dr. Tim Keller)
- "Humans were created to be God's representatives on earth and carry out His plan, abiding by the morals and concepts of justice that God himself abides by. According to the Biblical justice that God sets forth, all humans are equal, all humans are created in His image, and all humans deserve to be treated with fairness and justice." (The Bible Project)

WHAT DO WE MEAN WHEN WE SPEAK ABOUT DOING JUSTICE?

Most of the time in the Bible, justice is the term that refers to the activities that address the needs of the poor, oppressed, marginalized, or less privileged in society. Justice ministry may include ministries of compassion, but also sometimes include the Christian's response to the injustices in society.

Interestingly, while many people believe that justice is focused on punishing or chastising a lawbreaker, biblical justice immediately concerns the victim of wrongdoing. God cares about those who are hurting, needy, oppressed, and wronged. And Christians should care about what God cares about.

WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN'S RESPONSE TO DOING BIBLICAL JUSTICE?

Many people struggle with the idea of doing justice because it sounds like what has come to be called “the social gospel.” Like Tim Keller observes, “people who are really into justification tend to be quite nervous about justice. And people who are really into justice tend to shy away from justification. It’s rare to find people combining both justification and justice.” But people who are justified by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone should be the most concerned with biblical justice in our broken world.

It is true that the proclamation of the gospel is to have priority in all things. A person’s eternal salvation is of primary importance. However, this does not mean that engaging in deeds of justice and mercy is not an essential implication of the gospel for our lives. While Jesus prioritized love of God over love of neighbor (“the great and first commandment” of Matthew 22:38), He clearly did not intend for people to stop loving their neighbors as a result. Therefore, we are persuaded of the biblical priority of gospel proclamation and still want to affirm that deeds of justice and mercy should be a natural outcome of growth into Christ-likeness. This is not an either/or, but a both/and: Christians are called to proclaim the gospel and pursue justice.

BUT SHOULDN'T CHRISTIANS JUST CONCERN THEMSELVES WITH PREACHING THE GOSPEL?

It is not uncommon to hear well-meaning Christians say, “We should just preach the gospel.” Usually, the point is that Christians shouldn’t get involved in social issues.

As a church we are absolutely committed to preaching the gospel. This is the calling of every church and disciple of Jesus — to make the good news of Jesus known, that people might come to repentance from sin and reconciliation with God. But the question is, “Should we just preach the gospel, and nothing more than that?”

There are several reasons why just preaching the gospel is an insufficient approach to living out our faith in Christ. First, this is not what the Bible does with the gospel. If all we are called to do is preach the gospel, the apostles certainly could have saved some ink. Paul could have stopped writing after the first eleven chapters of Romans, which expound the gospel. But instead, he wrote five more chapters to unfold the implications of the gospel for how we are to live and relate to our neighbors and the world we live in. Most

Christians understand that the gospel leads us to respond to certain issues in society. Most would not argue that just preaching the gospel will take care of the injustices of abortion and sex trafficking. It is the gospel that compels believers to action in these realms.

Jesus was the preacher of preachers. But he did not just preach the gospel. **Matthew 9:35** tells us, “And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction.” Jesus combined the good news of the kingdom with acts of compassion, which demonstrated the nature of his kingship and kingdom. We could say Jesus had a two-pronged ministry of proclamation and demonstration of the gospel.

The Apostle Paul declares in **1 Corinthians 9:16**, “Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel.” He says of the gospel in **Galatians 1:8** “But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed.” Clearly Paul was committed to preaching the gospel. But that’s not all he was committed to. There was a time early in his ministry when he went to Jerusalem to visit the leaders of the Church there, to be sure that they were preaching the same gospel. He discovered that they (James, Peter, and John) were in agreement saying, “they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised” (**Galatians 2:9**). So, they were in lockstep with each other on the gospel they were called to preach. Then Paul adds this in **verse 10**: “Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.”

They did not say, “Go and preach the gospel and do not concern your ministry with anything beyond this.” They urged Paul in his ministry to care for the poor, which he says was the very thing he was eager to do. Ministering to the needs of the poor wasn’t their primary mission. Their mission was to preach the gospel. But ministering to the poor was a priority in their ministry. There is a distinction here between the gospel and helping the poor. They are not the same thing. There is the gospel and the results of the gospel. There is gospel proclamation and gospel application.

In light of these biblical considerations, it is not right or wise to believe we should just preach the gospel. We are committed to following the pattern of Jesus and the apostles in both preaching the gospel and applying the gospel for godly living and acts of compassion and justice.

IS BIBLICAL JUSTICE THE SAME THING AS SOCIAL JUSTICE?

This requires a defining of terms. Even though the idea of social justice is a biblical concept, over the past few years the rise of the term social justice among Christians has coincided with a growing level of misunderstanding, misuse, and misapplication. When some people hear the words social justice they think of a pagan and unbiblical conception of justice that alarmingly infiltrates the thinking of Christians today. And some churches and Christians are importing unbiblical concepts into their thinking about justice. That's a problem that can steer people away from the gospel. And while Christians can cautiously learn from culture, if you are conflating biblical justice with human agendas that champion the unbiblical ideas from Critical Race Theory or intersectionality, or feminist or liberation theologies, then we are concerned with the term social justice. But if you are talking about the desire for racial equity, or human rights, or caring for the unborn and the elderly in our society, then we would agree with that sense of social justice. Not every social justice issue leads to theological liberalism. To be clear, Christians are engaged in social justice when we speak up on issues such as abortion, religious liberty, racial harmony, and sex trafficking. In fact, we engage in social justice whenever we seek the moral reform of our society in a way that ensures every person is treated with dignity and equity.

However, because of this ever-growing problem of misunderstanding, we prefer not to use the term social justice. We understand that different groups may be talking about different ideas with those same words. This is why we have used — and will continue to use — the term biblical justice.

SHOULD THE CHURCH TALK ABOUT JUSTICE IN LIGHT OF CURRENT DAY EVENTS?

“Silence in the face of evil is itself evil: God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act.” (Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

Absolutely. The church should speak biblically and prophetically about God's desire for justice, and paint a picture of a just world that God invites everyone to be a part of. This means that Imprint Church will engage with societal issues and use media and means that we have available to us to share this good news with the world. God has given Imprint Church a responsibility to help the church see life through the lens of the Bible, not politics, and help our church family see how the gospel speaks to the cultural issues of our day.

Further, we believe that individuals in the church should be encouraged to engage society in any way that they think can make a difference. In addition to acts of compassion and defending the defenseless, we would encourage individuals as God has gifted them into participation in politics, the arts, rallies, or intellectual engagement with society. Others might consider hosting block parties, participating in local schools, or taking meals to neighbors in need. We believe that God calls all Christians to a life of grateful generosity in every realm of society because of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

FINAL REMARKS

We all want to rid the world of injustice. But we also need to recognize that injustice begins with us. Independent of our race, gender, or socio-economic position, we've all mistreated others and we're all guilty before a perfectly just God. For this reason, we need a Savior who will make all things right. Since justice in its simplest form means to set things right, we are grateful for the person and work of Jesus Christ who is the just Savior and judge that does not abandon us in a broken world, but willingly suffered injustice for the sake of the unjust. God forgives us and reconciles us to him through Christ, and has empowered us to be reconciled to one another. To Him be the glory.