

WISDOM: LIVING SUCCESSFULLY IN A TREACHEROUS WORLD Pursuing Justice, Pt 1 & Pt 2

“The thoughts of the righteous are just, *but* the counsels of the wicked are deceitful.”
—Proverbs 12:5

“You keep using that word . . .”

“Justice” is a popular word in our culture today, and many are ready to use any means possible to achieve their own version of it. According to the Foundation for Economic Education, protests and riots across the United States in 2020 resulted in over \$2 billion worth of damages to public infrastructure, commercial businesses, and private property. More than 15 people died as a result of the unrest, many more were severely injured, and untold numbers lost their livelihoods. All of this in the name of “justice.” One cannot help but recall Inigo Montoya’s famous phrase, “You keep using that word, I do not think it means what you think it means” (*The Princess Bride*).

Without question, *injustice is pervasive in this world*. Ours is a world outside the innocence of the Garden of Eden—a world stained by sin and corruption. It is only natural, then, that *the topic of justice would be a major theme in Scripture*. First and foremost, Scripture defines God as a God of justice. The very concept of justice is rooted in the very character of God Himself. Moses writes that “all His ways are just” (Deut 32:4). The psalmist writes that “righteousness and justice are the foundation of [His] throne” (89:14). Furthermore, Scripture defines justice as a lifestyle of those who have been redeemed: “He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8).

Naturally, a book focused on successful living in a treacherous, unjust world, would need to address the topic of justice. The book of Proverbs does just that. The specific term “justice” (מִשְׁפָּט, *mishpat*) occurs twenty times in the book. Its close synonyms—terms like “righteousness” (צֶדֶק, *tzedeq*), “equity” (מִשְׁרִים, *mesharim*), and “right/upright” (יָשָׁר, *yashar*)—together have more than two dozen more occurrences. In direct contrast to these terms, the vocabulary of *injustice*—terms such as “partiality,” “crookedness,” “false,” “perversion,” and “deceit” which are also found abundantly in Proverbs.

What is “justice” *biblically defined*? The term differs little from the term “righteousness.” In short, **justice refers to righteous (right) relations to all others who come across life’s path**. It describes a particular state of affairs between a man and those with whom he comes into contact—a state that meets God’s expectations for each relationship. But if “justice” and “righteousness” are to be distinguished, it is in this manner: “‘righteousness’ refers to the moral quality that establishes right order and ‘justice’ refers to the moral quality that restores that order when disturbed” (Waltke, *Proverbs 1-15*, 98).

Since Proverbs is about wisdom or skillful living, it has much to say about the look of and need for these right relations. A survey of the book yields at least **seven lessons about the pursuit of justice**.

1. Justice cannot be correctly defined apart from divine revelation.

As with every topic related to wisdom, to understand justice we must begin with wisdom’s *starting point*:

- 1:7; 9:10

This *fear* that serves as the beginning of knowledge is to be understood as a synonym for *divine revelation*, as in Psalm 19:7-9, where “the fear of the LORD” is parallel to “the law,” “testimony,” “precepts,” “commandment” and “judgments” of the LORD. Consequently, any effort to explain what

justice is apart from a direct appeal to God's word as the ultimate authority will be corrupted from the outset. It will be polluted by sin and truth-suppressing bias of man.

- **12:15; 14:12; 16:2, 25; 21:2**; see also Psalm 14:1-3; Rom 1:28-32; Ephesians 4:17-19.

This also means that apart from the LORD—the God who revealed Himself in the Bible—there can be no true expression of justice. Many today believe they can reject the God of the Bible and still advocate for justice. They treat justice as an external standard that exists whether God does or not. Even some who acknowledge the God of Scripture as the one true God contend that justice can be defined using the insights and presuppositions of worldly ideologies such as Critical Race Theory and Marxism, implying that these ideas can help “interpret” the Bible’s teaching about justice. But such a contention is foolishly naïve and directly contradicts what Proverbs teaches regarding the true and only source of wisdom (1:7).

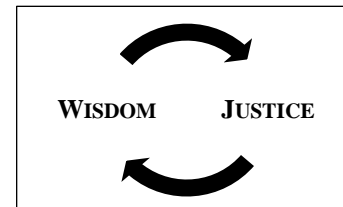
God's word definitively testifies that justice flows from God's character. He does not derive His exercise of justice from some external standard. *He is the standard!* He does not look to some impersonal rule or guidebook to learn what it means to act justly. *He is the essence of justice!* True justice—that is, pure and right relations toward others—can only be experienced when one's relations to others conform to God's character and will. Consequently, because He is the standard and essence of justice, all discussions about justice must be mediated by the LORD through His self-revelation.

- Deuteronomy 32:4; Psalm 33:4-5; Psalm 89:14; 119:142

2. Justice is an essential ingredient for and consequence of true wisdom.

As defined above, justice is relating to others in a manner that is consistent with God's character and will. This *right (righteous) relating to others* is both an essential ingredient *for* wisdom and an essential consequence *of* wisdom.

The God-fearer who pursues justice—that is, righteous relations with all others he encounters on life's path—will naturally increase in wisdom. He will grow in the skill of successful living despite the treacherous nature of this world. And the one who pursues wisdom—that is, the skill to live successfully in this fallen world—will automatically increase in justice toward others. The two go hand in hand as cause and effect: **2:6-9**.



This reciprocal relationship between wisdom and justice is described in the opening words of the book's prologue. The book of Proverbs was compiled specifically “to know wisdom and instruction, to discern the sayings of understanding, [and] to receive instruction in wise behavior, righteousness, justice, and equity” (**1:2-3**). It is also emphasized by the call of Lady Wisdom: **8:8, 15-21**.

Consequently, those who are hostile to the call of Lady Wisdom can never be looked on as “authorities” in the explanation and exercise of true justice. It is impossible to claim the one while rejecting the other.

- **12:5; 28:5**

3. Justice manifests itself in practical behavior and concrete situations.

For many of today's justice advocates, justice is something to demand from structures, institutions, and ethnicities. They decry “unconscious” injustices committed by individuals while ignoring quantifiable crimes such as abortion. When they explain what true justice looks like they speak in abstract terms. Their language is saturated with philosophical and political jargon and their principles are subjective and nuanced. All of this serves to their advantage: it allows them to treat justice as a wax nose, to bend it according to the need of the moment.

But Proverbs resists this abstraction and instead treats justice in concrete, objective terms. Justice is always a matter of personal responsibility for specific, moral actions. It is black-and-white, and it holds everyone to the same standard. A survey of Proverbs identifies three areas in particular where such justice will or will not be manifest.

(a) Justice will (or will not) manifest itself in the way one uses *words*:

- **12:17; 14:5; 16:13; 19:5, 9, 28; 21:28**; see also Exodus 20:16; 23:1.

(b) Justice will (or will not) manifest itself in how one makes *wealth*:

- **10:2a; 11:1; 13:23; 16:11; 20:10, 23**; see also Deuteronomy 25:13-16.

(c) Justice will (or will not) manifest itself in how one treats *the vulnerable* (specifically, those are “poor,” “needy,” or “afflicted” not as a consequent to their own iniquity):

- **14:31; 22:16, 22-23; 23:10; 28:3; 29:7; 31:8-9**

Proverbs is not concerned about justice in the abstract. It treats justice in terms of concrete actions based on concrete, divinely established moral laws to which individuals are held responsible.

4. Justice is not justice if it is influenced by personal identity or payoffs.

“Partiality” can be defined as “unfair bias in favor of one thing or person compared with another” (Oxford). It occurs when one looks not to the law and to the evidence to render judgment but favors or disfavors one person over another without regard to the law and the evidence. It puts one’s finger on the scale of justice to tilt it in favor of one side over the other. Proverbs condemns it. It is the antithesis of justice. Justice is to be blind with respect to personal identities.

JUSTICE: righteous relations to all others who come across life’s path.

- **17:15, 26; 18:5; 24:23-25**

Proverbs recognizes that this unjust exercise of partiality is often a *quid pro quo*—“a favor or advantage granted or expected in return for something” (Oxford). In the context of Proverbs, this favor or advantage typically takes the form of a *bribe*—a financial kickback (or other favor) intended to exonerate the guilty and obstruct the innocent.

- **15:27; 17:23; 28:21; 29:4**

The condemnation of partiality is not only a theme of Proverbs; it is a key emphasis of the Mosaic Law. In fact, not only does the Mosaic Law condemn partiality when it is used to advantage the rich and powerful but condemns it when it is used to benefit the poor (Exodus 23:1-7; Leviticus 19:11, 15; Deuteronomy 1:17a; 16:18-20; Deuteronomy 24:17). That partiality has no place in wisdom is emphasized also by the New Testament (1 Timothy 5:19-21; James 2:1-4, 9). Ultimately, since God is a God of justice, His essence is antithetical to any expression of partiality (Deuteronomy 10:17; Romans 2:11; 9:14; Galatians 2:6; Ephesians 6:9).

5. Justice is indispensable for the exercise of successful leadership.

The contents of the book of Proverbs were compiled to provide a curriculum for young princes. Consequently, a significant emphasis of the book is on leadership principles, and the exercise of justice is central to these teachings.

- **8:15-16; 16:10; 20:8, 26; 20:26; 21:15; 25:5; 29:4, 14; 31:3-9**

Essential qualities of good leadership in any sphere (parenting, ministry, business, government) are objectivity, impartiality, and equality. Leaders who play favorites, lead by inconsistent standards, break agreements, refuse to discipline wrongdoing, withhold worthy wages, or fail to acknowledge achievement will find their leadership efficacy severely hindered. Justice is indispensable to leadership.

6. Justice is a quality more valuable than wealth or sacrifice.

Like wisdom itself, Proverbs ranks righteous relations with others as more valuable than *wealth* or *religious sacrifice*:

- **15:8; 16:8; 21:3**; see also 1 Samuel 15:22-23; Micah 6:8

Saul's attempt to upstage God's demand for justice with respect to the Amalekites in 1 Samuel 15 (dedicating the livestock of Amalek to religious sacrifice rather than destruction and preserving King Agag's life rather than slaying him) is the ancient equivalent to today's "virtue signaling"—"the action or practice of publicly expressing opinions or sentiments intended to demonstrate one's good character or the moral correctness of one's position on a particular issue" (Oxford). Expressing public rage in support of a culturally determined inequality never relieves a man from his obligation to obey all of the moral requirements God has revealed in His word.

7. Justice may come slowly, but it is inevitable.

Proverbs leaves no room for doubt as to the certainty of *retributive justice*—the defense and restoration of righteousness when it has been transgressed. Judgment for unrighteous relations toward others is certain. In some cases, this avenging justice—pictured often in the term "rod"—will be meted out in this life by divinely-established human authorities such as parents and kings:

- **10:13; 13:24; 14:35; 20:8, 26; 22:15; 23:13; 26:3; 29:4, 15**

In other cases, this avenging justice will be meted out through God's law of cause and effect:

- **1:15-19, 1:28-33; 21:7; 28:10**

Ultimately, justice will come from the LORD Himself, and as such, man is not to take it upon himself to seek vengeance.

- **20:22; 24:29; 25:21-22; 29:26**; see also Leviticus 19:18; Deuteronomy 32:35; Romans 12:17-21.

For Further Reflection

- Continue to read one chapter of Proverbs each day.
- Read through "The Statement on Social Justice & the Gospel" (www.statementonsocialjustice.com).
- In your own words, describe "biblical justice." List several ways biblical justice differs from what is called "social justice" today.
- How should the Christian respond to those who want to employ non-biblical sources (philosophies, cultural movements, worldly ideologies) as tools to help define and understand justice?
- List several concrete actions you need to take, or habits you need to develop, to have more "right" (righteous) or "just" relations with those who come across your path? Think specifically in terms of your use of *words*, your making of *wealth*, and your interactions with the *needy*.
- How are Christians to articulate, practice, and advocate justice without cultivating an entitlement mentality or victimhood?

Audio & Notes: gracechurch.org/motw

Next Meeting: Apr 21 – Guest speaker, Paul Washer