

On Justice: A Biblical Perspective

An Old Testament prophet told his cousins their community had too many religious meetings, fancy projects, fund-raising schemes, and ego-satisfying music. He said they needed, instead, more fairness in their dealings with one another. Amos lived more than two millennia ago, but his words still echo in the ears of Christians and Jews around the world.

Amos 5:21-24 captures the heart of the prophet's message and ends with this phrase: "But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:24 NRSV).

Power in Relationships

Justice deals with how power is used in relationships; it's about treating people fairly, especially when you are in a more powerful position. Injustice always involves abuse of power.

God offers deliverance from the cycle of injustice. God has revealed a better way – a way that involves forgiveness for our failings but requires the pursuit of righteousness and justice, which are closely linked in Scripture.

The pursuit of righteousness and justice requires confrontation with injustice, because such abuse of power is contrary to the nature of God. Opposing sources of power are needed to fight the abuse of power, and God provides that power through the Holy Spirit and through Scripture, with their revelation of God's standard for justice.

Justice in Scripture

Justice is important in Scripture. The more popular contemporary English translations of the Bible use the word "justice" 130-160 times, appearing in both the Old and New testaments. (The King James Version used "justice" much less, tending to use forms of "judgment," "righteousness," or "vengeance" instead.)

Justice in the Old Testament

Three Hebrew words convey aspects of justice in the Old Testament -- *mispat* (or *mishpat*), *sedeq* (or *tzadeq*), and *sedaqa* (or *tzadeqah*). The Hebrew *mispat* has to do with rendering a verdict, as in a court sentence. It is translated as both justice and judgment.

Timothy Keller renders a more general understanding. *Mispat* is "giving people what they are due, whether punishment or protection or care. ... Over and over again, *mishpat* describes taking up the care and cause of widows, orphans, immigrants, and the poor -- those who have been called 'the quartet of

the vulnerable’,” Keller says. “The *mishpat*, or justness, of a society, according to the Bible, is evaluated by how it treats these groups. Any neglect shown to the needs of the members of this quartet is not called merely lack of mercy or charity, but a violation of justice, of *mishpat*.”ⁱ

The second and third Hebrew words are closely related to one another. *Sedeq*, is usually rendered as righteousness, justice, or rightness. T.B. Maston, in writing about both words, noted the importance of relationships in this form of justice or righteousness. “One is righteous when he fulfills the demands of a relationship.”ⁱⁱⁱ The word is “primarily about being in a right relationship with God,” Keller says, but the “righteous life that results is profoundly social.”ⁱⁱⁱ

In the varied stories and in the law conveyed through the Old Testament, Scripture emphasizes that God is just and the people of God are to promote justice.

Here are some examples of how “justice” appears in the Old Testament (all translations NRSV):

*You shall not pervert the **justice** due to your poor in their lawsuits (Exodus 23:6).*

*You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with **justice** you shall judge your neighbor (Leviticus 19:15).*

***Justice**, and only **justice**, you shall pursue, so that you may live and occupy the land that the LORD your God is giving you (Deut. 16:20).*

*“Cursed be anyone who deprives the alien, the orphan, and the widow of **justice**.” All the people shall say, “Amen!” (Deut. 27:19).*

*Now, let the fear of the LORD be upon you; take care what you do, for there is no perversion of **justice** with the LORD our God, or partiality, or taking of bribes” (2 Chron. 19:7).*

*He [the LORD] loves righteousness and **justice**; the earth is full of the steadfast love of the LORD. (Psalm 33:5)*

*The mouths of the righteous utter wisdom, and their tongues speak **justice**. (Psalm 37:30)*

*To do righteousness and **justice** is more acceptable to the LORD than sacrifice. (Prov. 21:3)*

*learn to do good; seek **justice**, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. (Isaiah 1:17)*

He has told you, O mortal, 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)

Ultimately, justice is tied to a community. The Old Testament is about God's relationship with a people -- Israel. In 2 Chronicles 7:14, God calls Israel "my people who are called by my name," and God tells them to humble themselves, pray, seek God's face, and turn from wickedness. God addresses the people as a connected community. This connectedness creates responsibility to pursue both holiness and justice, with a special concern for those in need or suffering.

Justice in the New Testament

In the New Testament, various forms of the noun *dikaiosyn* can mean righteousness, innocence, justice, justification. *Dikaiosyn* is prominent in Paul's letters, and he connected God's justice with humanity's justice. Christians do not pursue justice simply out of some sense of it being the right or loving thing to do; they pursue it because it is an expression of the nature of God.

Scripture notes several people as saying Jesus was a just or righteous man. Peter, speaking to the people from Solomon's Portico, said,

"But you rejected the Holy and Righteous [dikaion] One and asked to have a murderer given to you" (Acts 3:14 NRSV).

Stephen, in reciting Jewish history before the high priest, made the connection between prophetic utterance and Jesus.

"Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous [dikaiou] One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers" (Acts 7:52 NRSV).

Paul, after being arrested at the temple, made the same connection to prophecy.

Then he [Paul] said, "The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will, to see the Righteous [dikaion] One and to hear his own voice" (Acts 22:14 NRSV).

Two Romans called Jesus just or righteous. While Jesus was being tried, the wife of Pontius Pilate warned her husband,

"Have nothing to do with that innocent [dikaiō] man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him" (Matt. 27:19 NRSV).

And, in the midst of the crucifixion,

When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, "Certainly this man was innocent [dikaios]" (Luke 23:47 NRSV).

In his teaching, Jesus picked up the Old Testament theme regarding the disadvantaged when he spoke of the “least of these,” as recorded in Matthew 25:40, 45. Jesus tells of the judgment of nations when the “Son of Man comes in his glory” (v. 31). The king will separate people as a shepherd divides sheep and goats (v. 32). The sheep represent the righteous (*dikaioi*), and the king says to the sheep,

“Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me” (vv. 34-36).

But the righteous did not recall doing these things for the king and asked when they had done so. He replied,

“Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (v. 40).

In other words, the “least of these” are the people who are the hungry, thirsty, strangers, unclothed, sick, and in prison, and they are in some special sense members of the king’s family. People who care for the disadvantaged are just or righteous in God’s eyes.

Jesus’ words translated with forms of the Greek *dikaios* surface in a variety of settings. When used, it describes those who are right with God. For instance, Jesus says,

“Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous [dikaioi] people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.” (Matt. 13:17 NRSV)

And,

“Then the righteous [dikaioi] will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!” (Matt. 13:43 NRSV)

In John 5:30, Jesus uses a form of the word to describe his actions.

“I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just [dikaia], because I seek to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me” (NRSV).

The repeated use of the various forms of the Greek *dikaios* in the New Testament drives home the truth that God’s ethical goal for people includes both righteousness and justice, both personal morality and social justice. To divide the two is not biblical.

The New Testament follows the pattern set by the Old Testament -- God is just; God's people should be just. Jesus is just; Jesus followers should be just.

*[Jesus:] "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: **justice** and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others."* (Matt. 23:23)

*And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant **justice** to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant **justice** to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"* (Luke 18:6-8)

*And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets — who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered **justice**, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight* (Heb. 11:32-34).

Conclusion

A central theme of the gospel is the coming of the kingdom of God -- the reign of God.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:14-15 NRSV).

When God is allowed to reign in lives, justice becomes important. Followers of Christ become sensitive to injustices, especially when they victimize suffering and marginalized people. And when they see injustice, they do not stand by quietly; they actively pursue justice. They challenge an unjust world with the justice of God and the importance of justice for all people.

ⁱ Timothy Keller, *Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes Us Just* (New York: Dutton, Penguin Group USA, 2010), 3-5.

ⁱⁱ T. B. Maston, *Biblical Ethics: A Guide to the Ethical Message of the Scriptures from Genesis through Revelation* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1982), 5.

ⁱⁱⁱ Keller, 11.