

Biblical Justice

Introduction: We hear about “social justice” a lot these days. But you might not even know exactly what that phrase means. Why *social* justice? Isn't justice good enough? Indeed, some Christians argue that “social justice” is a distortion of real justice, and that we just need plain old justice. Other Christians argue that social justice is a critical aspect of our faith and is even either part of the gospel or demanded of us by the gospel. So what do we make of all of this? Let's look at what God's word has to say about justice and let's let God define justice for us and direct us in it.

- What would you say justice is? How would you define it?
- What is social justice?

I. Various Views of Justice

A. Meanings that have to do with a standard of what is good or right or fair

1. The principle of what is good or right or fair (in conformity to a standard of what is good or right or fair)
 - A lot rides on what that standard is. It could be the law of the land or the ethics of a religion or philosophy or something else.
2. Conformity to a standard of what is good or right or fair
3. The maintenance or administration of what is good or right or fair (in conformity to a standard of what is good or right or fair)

B. Meanings for social justice

1. The application of biblical principles of justice to society
2. Applying justice (whatever that means) to society, especially in its laws and institutions
3. The elimination of all forms of social oppression understood as a system or actions that result in or allow(s) for inequality (whether of opportunity or outcome)

II. The biblical language of justice

A. 2 main Hebrew words in the OT

1. *Mishpat* – Comes from a verb that means “to judge, rule, govern,” and “can be used to designate almost any aspect of civil or religious government” (*TWOT*, 948). (It can refer to a legal judgment/decision, a lawsuit, conformity to a standard, and justice.)
 - So why might the word often mean “justice?” → Judging and law and government are especially concerned with justice and responsible to give it or ensure it or maintain it.
2. *Tzedek* or *Tzadeqah* – Seem to have originated with the idea of being straight, basically coming to mean conformity to a standard, being straight in line with the standard so to speak. Often has to do with relationships, relating to others, etc.

B. 2 main Greek words in the NT

1. *Dikaiosyne* – Basically means righteousness
 - a. What is righteousness? → That which is right in God's sight (i.e. that which conforms to the standard of his will); right relationship with God
 - b. This is practically synonymous with justice.
 2. *Krisis* – Means judgment, evaluation of someone's actions, condemnation/punishment, the basis on which a judgment is made, and the relevant one for our concern in this study, the standard by which judgments and evaluations are to be made
- Based on the Bible's language for the concept of justice, what preliminary conclusion can we draw about God's general view of justice? → That which conforms to the standard of goodness/rightness.
 - What is the standard of goodness and rightness? → God's character and will

C. Biblical justice at its core is that which conforms to the standard of God's character and will.

- It can be (1) the principle = God's will itself, (2) conformity to his will, or (3) the maintenance or administration or establishment of God's will (God rewarding and punishing based on conformity or lack of conformity to his will fits here).

III. A survey of Biblical Passages

- A. Deut 30:33 (see 31-33) – What does the word for justice (*tzadeqah*) seem to mean here (many translations translate it as something like “honesty” here)? → Conformity to the agreement (i.e., standard) Jacob was suggesting to Laban
- B. Lev 19:36 – What does the word for justice (*tzadeqah*) seem to mean here (translations tend to translate it as “honest” or “just” here)? → Adherence to a standard of weight in adherence to a standard of what is right
- C. Deut 32:4
1. More literally, “all his ways are justice,” a more striking way to depict God as just.
 - What might this suggest about God and justice? → Justice, what is right, is defined by his character and ways
 - What does it mean for God to be the rock? → He is utterly dependable and faithful
 - What do we learn about God from this verse? → Work through the details of the verse
 - ~ The last line is best translated “righteous (or just) and upright is he.” *Tzadiq* is the first word here, and the second is a word that means “straight, right.”
 2. God's character and will are the standard of what is good and right.
- D. Psalm 36:6 – Righteousness (*tzadeqah*) and justice (*mishpat*) → basically synonymous here
- Like the mighty mountains? → Massive; powerful; awesome
 - Like the great deep? → same, possibly with the added nuance of dangerous (if violated)
 - What are righteousness and justice associated with here? → preserving man and beast
 - ~ This raises an interesting question. If God's preserving of creaturely life is righteous/just, would it be wrong for him not to preserve creaturely life? Would it be unrighteous, unjust, wrong? → No!
1. Something can be righteous/just/good-and-right without it being required, without not-doing-it being unrighteous/unjust/wrong .
 - So how do you know if something is required as justice rather than just a good thing to do?
 - a. God commands it in his word
 - b. The Holy Spirit leads us (Rom 8:1-6; 12-14; Gal 5:16-25)
 2. God's justice is massive, awesome, powerful, and potentially dangerous for sinners.
- E. Rom 2:5-11, 13 → God's righteousness/justice is the standard by which he measures human conduct
- What does God's judgment being righteous mean (5)? → In accordance with his character and will and what is true
 - ~ Where do we see that in the text? → according to what he has done (6) // good vs. evil (7-10) // doers of the law (13)
 - Notice anything else about God's righteous/just judgment in this passage? Hint: v. 11 → It is impartial
 - ~ Impartial? → Fairness; treating people based on the same standard without regard for other considerations such as race or social or economic status.
 - ** God's justice (i.e., his will) is the standard by which he measures human conduct, and it is impartial. Biblical justice is impartial.
 - ** God's justice can be expressed in reward or punishment.
- F. Ex 23:2-3; 6-9 (cf. Deut 16:18-20; Lev 19:15) – What do we learn about justice in these verses?
1. V. 2 – Pervert justice? (cf. Deut 16:19 distort justice) → Deviate from what is true, fair, right, correct
 2. V. 3 – Impartial? → In addition to what we already said, you can see what this entails concretely in the following clauses.
 - Examples of impartiality in these verses?
 - ~ How does a bribe blind the eyes or pervert justice?
 3. Deut 16:20 speaks of pursuing justice and only justice. Means? → Do what is right and true no matter what. Do not let anything bring you to do other than justice.
- G. Sometimes God's salvation or forgiveness is considered an expression of his righteousness/justice
- 1 John 1:9 – Why would that be? → (1) Jesus took our sins/punishment (cf. Rom 3:26); (2) Fulfillment of

his promise; (3) expression of his character – not that he owes it

H. Justice/righteousness gets associated with helping the poor/needy/vulnerable and making sure they are protected from oppression

– Isa 1:17; Psalm 82:2-4 – What do these verses portray as justice? → Making sure the needy/vulnerable get fair treatment/are not oppressed

– Dan 4:27; Matt 6:1-2 – What do these verses portray as justice/righteousness? → Helping/giving to/taking care of the poor more generally

~ As I looked at various verses on justice, I did not really find a lot that specifically linked justice to this, though some people really emphasize this as a major part of biblical justice, often called social justice. It surely is part of justice in the broad sense of acting in accordance with God's character. There is a lot in the Bible calling us to give to the poor and take care of the needy. It is surely an important part of righteousness. But it is not as emphasized as specifically part of justice as many claim.

– But listen to Job's attitude (again, not specifically linking taking care of the needy to justice though he does speak of justice in this passage): Job 31:13-23

1. These types of passages seem to be what those who advocate for “social justice” as eliminating inequality appeal to for biblical support. But they do not seem to be about that. Rather, they seem to be about making sure the needy/vulnerable get fair treatment/are not oppressed and helping the needy.

– Are we properly committed to helping the needy?

– Does this apply to our present cultural moment and all that is going on with regard to racism in our country?

– How might we help the needy?

~ Some thoughts from Tim Keller: Rectifying justice, or mishpat, in our world could mean prosecuting the men who batter, exploit and rob poor women. It could also mean respectfully putting pressure on a local police department until they respond to calls and crimes as quickly in the poor part of town as in the prosperous part. Another example would be to form an organization that both prosecutes and seeks justice against loan companies that prey on the poor and the elderly with dishonest and exploitive [sic] practices.

Primary justice, or tzadeqah, may mean taking the time personally to meet the needs of the handicapped, the elderly or the hungry in our neighborhoods. Or it could mean the establishment of new nonprofits to serve the interests of these classes of persons. It could also mean a group of families from the more prosperous side of town adopting the public school in a poor community and making generous donations of money and pro bono work in order to improve the quality of education there. (“What Is Biblical Justice?” <https://relevantmagazine.com/god/practical-faith/what-biblical-justice>)

~ It may also be that we are doing well with this. Perhaps there is nothing specifically more we are supposed to be doing right now. But there is an attitude to this as well, to be like Jesus and always looking to help others who are in need.

J. Micah 6:8 – Doing justice is a basic aspect of Christian living

– What does doing justice mean (in light of our study)?

– What does this verse reveal about doing justice?

– What does justice go along with in this verse?

K. The blessing of justification by faith: Romans 3:21-30

Conclusion: Matthew 6:33 and review