

Theology of Justice

An Introduction

**JUST
LOVE**

Theology of Justice

Theology really matters to us. Grounding our pursuit of justice theologically – in the God we encounter in the Bible – is vital. That doesn't just mean proof-texting: finding a few passages that seem to support what we already believe, taking them out of their context and using that to backup all that we do. It means starting with the whole narrative of scripture and asking where justice fits in with that big picture.

This is a short introduction to two key questions:

- what do we mean by justice?
- why should we care about justice?

What do we mean by justice?

Justice is a difficult and contested word. What one person considers just, another may consider unjust.

It's very important that we distinguish between our human ideas of justice and God's justice. Our task is to make God's justice our starting point.

We have a separate document if you want to explore this question in more detail, but very briefly: **justice is a characteristic of the God we worship.** God's justice is about putting to right all that is wrong in creation; mending all that has been broken by sin.

This justice is active, it is something that God does, not an abstract or impersonal theory (1). It means struggling against injustice, it is shaped by self-giving love, and its goal is a world of righteousness. In both Hebrew and Greek, righteousness and justice are the same word and they describe a state of right relationships in every dimension - between God, people, and creation.

If we want to talk about social justice - which focuses particularly on right relationships between people - then we need to locate it in that bigger vision of a right, just, redeemed world that we find in scripture. That picture will be fleshed out below as we explore the question of why we should care about justice.

Why should we care about justice?

We care about justice because God does. This is a very brief overview of justice throughout the bible. It's a huge theme and this barely scrapes the surface. We hope it encourages you to open up your bibles and read books that explore the topic in more depth.

Creation

In the opening chapters of Genesis, we see a good and just God creating a good and just world. The relationships between God, people and creation were as they should be.

Fall

With the Fall, however, sin entered into God's good creation. Sin breaks our relationship with God, and it also breaks our relationship with each other, with ourselves, and with creation (2). Injustice is a result of sin – both personal sin, and systemic sin – a result of those broken relationships.

Covenant

After the Fall, God initiated a great redemption plan that began with the call of Abraham. God called to himself a people – a family that became a kingdom under God's rule who were to reflect God's righteousness and justice to the world.

Exodus

The defining story in the identity of ancient Israel was the Exodus. God heard the cries of oppressed slaves and took their side – liberating them and forming them into his people.

Throughout the Old Testament, God repeatedly instructed his people to remember that they had been slaves and that he had saved them.

Law

To this community of liberated slaves, God gave the law. The Old Testament law is not legally binding on Christians, but it is still inspired scripture and it reveals God's character. One thing very clear in the law is that God cares for individuals and for the social, economic, political and ecological systems that shape human life (3). God cares how his people relate to him, and about how his people relate to others, to themselves, and to creation. In particular, the law reveals God's concern for widows, orphans, foreigners and the poor. The God of the bible cares especially for the most vulnerable in society and he instructs his people to do the same.

Prophets

The prophets of the Old Testament functioned as spokespeople for God.

The two things that the prophets criticised more than anything else were idolatry and injustice. The prophets criticised both personal and systemic injustice. They saved some of their harshest words for those who claimed to follow God while exploiting the poor and upholding sinful social structures. Isaiah, for example, criticised the 'meaningless offerings' and 'worthless assemblies' of those who failed to 'seek justice' and 'defend the oppressed.' He called out the hypocrisy of those who fast and 'exploit all [their] workers' (4). Their message was clear: worship without justice is not true worship.

Alongside their criticism, the prophets cast visions of what life under God's rule could look like – using poetry to imagine a coming kingdom, a world under God's rule – a world, to use the language of Hosea 2, of love and compassion, righteousness and justice (5).

Jesus

Jesus is not just another episode in this story. He is the centre of the entire story, the one in whom all of God's promises are fulfilled, not just for Israel, but for the whole world. Jesus picked up on many great themes from the Old Testament: creation and exodus, jubilee and kingship, prophetic criticism and prophetic imagination. 1 in 10 verses in Matthew and Mark are directly about social justice. In Luke it's 1 in 7. The only thing Jesus talked about more than justice was the Kingdom, and it is clear in Luke 4 that his self-identity as Israel's King - the Messiah - had at its very core Isaiah's jubilee vision of good news to the poor.

Justice is a huge theme of what Jesus said – centring around his teachings on love – love for God and neighbour, love that reaches across social boundaries, love even for enemies. **Justice is also a huge theme in what Jesus did.** From his birth to his death, Jesus lived with victims of injustice, and he was a victim of injustice.

Jesus associated with people across the social spectrum. In itself that's remarkable in the first century Near East, but what's really remarkable is the amount of time he spent with the lowest strata of society. The gospels are unique among ancient biographies in their focus on people at the bottom of society (6).

The Cross

Jesus' crucifixion reminds us that only the Creator of the universe can put right all that is wrong and bring about perfect justice in his creation (7). The cross is the decisive act in God's redemptive mission. On the cross Jesus took upon himself the injustice of the world and dealt with sin on every level – reconciling our broken relationships with God, ourselves, each other and creation.

Through the rest of the New Testament, we see the early church living in response to the cross.

Justice is central, not peripheral, both in the apostles' teaching and in the actions of the early church, for example in the sharing of possessions, in the care of widows, and in the importance placed on remembering the poor (8).

In his letters – particularly Ephesians and Colossians – Paul fleshes out the cosmic scale of the gospel. Through Jesus' death and resurrection God was reconciling to himself all of the dimensions of relationship that were broken at the fall.

Right at **the heart of our motivation for pursuing justice is grace**. Paul stresses that grace is given to the undeserving, regardless of any human criteria of worth. This undeserved gift has two major justice implications: first, it subverts all hierarchies of worth and status – God's grace is not reserved for the powerful, wealthy or privileged. Second, grace propels believers into communities of 'mutual love and mutual service.'

Those who receive undeserved, 'incongruous' grace in Jesus naturally extend that grace to others (9). Justification compels us, among other things, to justice.

For Paul, grace, faith and good works are all complementary, as long as they're in the right order. Ephesians 2 is clear – we are saved by grace through faith in order to do good works. The gospel transforms how we live, not just what we believe.

New Creation

Christian hope is much bigger than going to heaven when we die. It is a picture of new creation, of heaven coming to earth, of physical bodily resurrection, of God's rule and reign, of God dwelling with his people. It is the ultimate fulfilment of that vision throughout the bible of right relationships in every dimension. That hope sets the Church on a trajectory into the world not away from the world – towards active participation in God's redemptive mission.

Pursuing social justice is a part of that bigger picture – a part of the mission of God to bring all things under Christ’s lordship. We find ourselves in this story, between the cross and new creation. Our task is to point back to the story that has come before us, and to point forward to our future hope (10).

To summarise, we do justice because it is one of the greatest themes in the bible. **God is just, God does justice, and God calls His people to do justice.** We live justly as a response to the grace shown to us in Jesus, and in anticipation of the new creation where all injustice will be put right.

If you want to dig deeper into the theology of social justice then have a chat with your Just Love staff worker and they can help to recommend books or other resources that would help.

Sources

(1) Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015)

(2) Bryant L. Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1999), 27.

(2) Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor and Yourself* (Chicago: Moody, 2012), Chapters 1-3.

(3) Howard Peskett and Vinoth Ramachandra, *The Message of Mission* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2012).

(4) Isaiah 1 and 58.

(5) Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination: Second Edition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001).

(6) Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eye-Witness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

(7) Rutledge, *The Crucifixion*, 124.

(8) For example, Acts 2, 4, 6; Galatians 2.10.

(9). John Barclay, *Paul and the Subversive Power of Grace* (Cambridge: Grove, 2016), 11-22.

(10) Tom Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (London: SPCK, 2007), 53-9; Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996).