

JUST LOVE.

A Just Love Guide to Theology of Social Justice

Justice Throughout Scripture

Issues of injustice and poverty are a consistently recurring theme throughout scripture, with over 2,000 verses containing direct teaching on these themes. We thought it would be a good idea to begin with a selection of verses from various areas of the Bible, to give you a flavour of what God has to say about these issues.

The Law

- 'Do not mistreat an alien or oppress him, for you were aliens in Egypt. Do not take advantage of a widow or an orphan. If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry.' (Exodus 22:21-23).
- 'If you lend money to one of my people among you who is needy, do not be like a moneylender; charge him no interest.' (Exodus 22:25).
- 'If you take your neighbour's cloak as a pledge, return it to him by sunset, because his cloak is the only covering he has for his body.' (Exodus 22:26-27).
- 'Do not deny justice to your poor people in their lawsuits. Have nothing to do with a false charge and do not put an innocent or honest person to death, for I will not acquit the guilty. Do not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds those who see and twists the words of the righteous. Do not oppress an alien; you yourselves know how it feels to be aliens, because you were aliens in Egypt.' (Exodus 23:6-9).
- 'When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the alien. I am the Lord your God.' (Leviticus 19:9-10).
- 'Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favour to the great, but judge your neighbour fairly.' (Leviticus 19:15).
- 'Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you; each one of you is return to his family property and each to his own clan.' (Leviticus 25:10).
- 'If one of your countrymen becomes poor and is unable to support himself among you, help him as you would an alien or a temporary resident, so he can continue to live among you.' (Leviticus 25:35).
- 'The community is to have the same rules for you and the alien living among you; this is a lasting ordinance for the generations to come. You and the alien shall be the same before the Lord.' (Numbers 15:15).
- 'At the end of every seven years you must cancel debts... However, there should be no poor among you, for in the land the Lord your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you, if only you fully obey the Lord your God and are careful to follow all of these commands I am giving you today.' (Deuteronomy 15:1-5).

Psalms and Proverbs

- 'The Lord loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of his unfailing love.' (Psalm 33:5). ● 'Your people settled in it, and from your bounty, O God, you provided for the poor.' (Psalm 68:10).
- 'Defend the cause of the weak and the fatherless; maintain the rights of the poor and oppressed. Rescue the weak and needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.' (Psalm 82:3-4).
- 'Blessed are they who maintain justice, who constantly do what is right.' (Psalm 106:3).
- 'He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; he seats them with the princes of their people.' (Psalm 113:7-8).
- 'I know that the Lord secures justice for the poor and upholds the cause of the needy.' (Psalm 140:12).
- 'He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honours God.' (Proverbs 14:31).
- 'The righteous care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern.' (Proverbs 29:7).
- 'Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.' (Proverbs 31:8-9).

The Prophets

- 'Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts my soul hates. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood; wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.' (Isaiah 1:14-17).
- 'Woe those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people, making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless.' (Isaiah 10:1-2).
- 'Is this not the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter – when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?' (Isaiah 58:6-7).
- 'This is what the Lord says: Do what is just and right. Rescue from the hands of his oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the alien, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place.' (Jeremiah 22:3).
- 'But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!' (Amos 5:24).
- 'And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.' (Micah 6:8).

The Gospels

- 'Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations.' (Matthew 12:18).

- 'If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.' (Matthew 19:21).
- 'Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices – mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness.' (Matthew 23:23).
- 'I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything – all she had to live on.' (Mark 12:43-44).
- 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.' (Luke 4:18-19).
- 'Then the King will say to those on his right, "Come you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink..." The King will reply, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'" (Matthew 25:34-40).
- 'But a Samaritan, as he travelled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. "Look after him," he said, "and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you might have." Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?' (Luke 10:33-36).
- 'Go out quickly into the streets and the alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.' (Luke 14:21).

Acts and Epistles

- 'All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.' (Acts 2:44-47).
- 'There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.' (Acts 4:34-35).
- 'Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality.' (2 Corinthians 8:13-14).
- 'Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.' (James 2:15-17).
- 'Look! The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty.' (James 5:4).

What is justice?

It's great to read all of these verses about 'justice', but it can also be helpful to take a step back and ask what we mean when we refer to justice. If we want to inspire all Christian students to pursue the biblical call to social justice, then we need to be really clear on what that is. Often, different people will have different ideas in mind when they talk about justice, which makes discussions about the importance of justice all the more difficult.

There's a number of words in the Bible that are translated as justice and that we would put under our understanding of social justice. One is 'mishpat', which is a rectifying justice – giving people what they are due – often used to talk about the poor/widow/orphan/alien in the OT. It can also be used in the context of distributing punishment. This might be seen as quite an un-extravagant view of justice, particularly in comparison to God's grace, which gives us far more than simply 'what we are due'.

Another word is 'tzedek'/'tsedeq', (translated righteousness or justice) which is more about right relationships – with God, with others, and with creation. This can sometimes be thought of in terms of vertical and horizontal relationships (and should not be thought of as only one or the other). If this was the prevalent behavior, justice in the 'mishpat' sense would be unnecessary because we would all be living in right relationship. This (tsedeq) is similar to the New Testament word 'dikaios', which can also be translated as justice and righteousness.

I think we would also include 'chesedh', (often translated mercy) as a part of our definition of justice, as this word is talking about God's unconditional grace and compassion. Micah 6:8 puts 'mishpat' and 'chesedh' next to each other (act justly, love mercy).

The ultimate picture of God's justice, then, is the reconciliation of all things between God, his people and his creation (Colossians 1:16-20). We can work towards this in the present by giving to each what they are due (mishpat), and pouring out grace and compassion (chesedh). It is also worth noting that 'social' justice has a more specific focus on the 'horizontal' relationships – reconciling people to each other and seeking a more 'just' society – although this is fundamentally bound together with reconciliation to God as well.

Building a theology

It begins to become quite clear through all of the previous verses (to which we could add many more) that social justice is a strongly recurring theme through scripture. However, we must a complete picture of how this fits in with in with a theology that runs from our creation narrative to our eschatology. In this section we will explore verses that start to bring this narrative together, and draw on the work of various authors as we think about what the role of Christians and the church is today.

Creation

- 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth... And God saw that it was good.' (Genesis 1). *The Bible begins with creation, the creation of this earth, and God is pleased with it. The physical, material world is valuable to God, and so as we follow him we must value it too. It is worth remembering that creation is God's, and not ours. This has serious implications in terms of how we steward it (see below) and how generous we are with the possessions that we temporarily inherit.*

- “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.’ (Genesis 1:26-27). *Men and women bear the image of God, they are made in God’s likeness. This gives each individual significant and inviolable moral worth. They are also commissioned to steward, to rule over the earth – we were not only created for relationship with God, but also for relationship with each other and with creation (see Gen 2:18).*
- ‘God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.’ (Genesis 1:31). *The creation of humans is the pinnacle of God’s creation – it was very good. Caring for other human beings is the pinnacle of our role as stewards of God’s earth.*
- ‘It is not good for man to be alone.’ (Genesis 2:18). *Despite being with God in the Garden of Eden, things are not good for man. We require human relationship.*
- ‘The ultimate reason God creates’, said Jonathan Edwards, the father of the Great Awakening, , ‘is not to remedy some lack in God, but to extend that perfect internal communication of the triune of God’s goodness and love... God’s joy and happiness and delight in divine perfections is expressed eternally by communicating that happiness and delight to created beings... The universe is an explosion of God’s glory. Perfect goodness, beauty and love radiate from God and draw creatures to ever increasingly share in the Godhead’s goodness and delight¹... The ultimate end of creation, then, is a union in love between God and loving creatures.’ *Creation is a supreme act of love and joy. Humanity, the pinnacle of this creation, and bearing the image of God himself, is commissioned to rule over it. Pursuing justice is to join with the redemption of this supreme creation act.*

The Fall

- ‘Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized that they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.’ (Genesis 3:7). *Man and woman begin to feel shame, and their relationship with each other is compromised and no longer completely as it should be. We continue to see the broken relationships between humans in Genesis 4, in the story of Cain and Abel.*
- ‘Then the man and his wife heard the sounds of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden... and they hid.’ (Genesis 3:8). *The relationship between humans and God is also broken. We can no longer have the complete relationship with our creator that we were supposed to have.*

¹ George Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*

- ‘Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life.’ (Genesis 3:17). *The relationship between humans and creation is broken as a further consequence of the fall.*

- *The beauty, perfection, joy and perfect expression of love through God's creation is broken by humanity. Sin enters the world and the harmony between humans, God and creation is fractured. God's wrath, and hatred of sin, an aspect of his perfect justice, is revealed, and we know that sin must be paid for if we are to see the reconciliation of all things.*

Incarnation and Salvation

- *'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'* (Luke 4:18-19). *This is the declaration that begins Jesus' ministry – a declaration that has both spiritual and physical implications.*
- *'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.'* (John 3:16). *Perhaps the most famous verse of all, beginning with a declaration of God's love for the world. It then points us towards the opportunity of salvation through Christ – the price of sin, set at the fall, is paid for, and God's wrath is satisfied. Humanity no longer has to incur punishment, and reconciliation to God and each other can begin to take place.*
- *'If you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.'* (Romans 10:9). *We can be saved by grace through faith. We are saved from condemnation, but must also think about what we are saved to. We can respond to an outpouring of love on our behalf by doing the same for others. We accept God's gracious gift, and then we can begin to join with the reconciliation process. The justified do justice.*

Redemption

- *'For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.'* (1 Thessalonians 4:16).
- *'Behold, I will create a new heavens and a new earth.'* (Isaiah 65:17).
- *'But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.'* (2 Peter 3:13).
- *'So it will be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable.'* (1 Corinthians 15:42). *When thinking about Christianity, we often fail to think about the ultimate destination of God's plan in a collective sense. We are taught that our own salvation will lead to an eternity spent with God, but we must think beyond that. The whole biblical story begins with a perfect creation, displaying perfect relationships between all, and it ends the same way with a new, or renewed, creation. That is what God is ultimately working towards, and humanity is a key part of that.*

The Role of the Church/Christians

Commandment and Commission

- *We often look to the great commandment and the great commission as guiding principles for the role of Christians today, so we will look to these before considering our role in the light of the creation, fall, incarnation and redemption story we previously mapped out.*
- *'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength... Love your neighbour as yourself.'* (Mark 12:30-31). *This seems like a fairly straightforward command, but it can be diluted if we i) separate loving God and loving neighbour or ii) reduce what we mean by loving our neighbour.*
 - *'I tell you the truth whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'* (Matthew 25:40). *This passage suggests that to love others is to love God, and that to fail to love others is to fail to love God. Loving our neighbour is a necessary condition for loving God, it is not a separate command.*
 - *"Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."* (Luke 10:36-37). *The parable of the Good Samaritan tells us that loving our neighbour has strong elements of justice and mercy to it, and that the 'neighbour' we must love is not restricted to those we expect or know. Tim Keller says that 'Jesus is the Great Samaritan towards whom the Good Samaritan points. Before you can give this neighbour-love, you need to receive it. Only if you have been saved graciously by someone who owes you the opposite will you go out into the world looking to help absolutely anyone in need.'* This once again links loving our neighbour to loving God.
- *'Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.'* (Matthew 28:19-20). *This is absolutely about evangelism, but discipleship and obedience to commands is at the heart of it, and social justice is a crucial part of this. We can often be guilty of separating things that the Bible holds together. People have said that the great commandment points us towards justice and the great commission towards evangelism – but loving our neighbour includes telling them about God, and making disciples includes doing justice with people.*

Justice and Evangelism

- *'Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel.'* (1 Corinthians 9:16). *Paul's language suggests the crucial, non-negotiable prioritization of gospel proclamation, and we see similarly strong passages about justice in Matthew 25 and Isaiah 58.*
- *'Because God is active in the world we can attempt social reform. But society will not be redeemed until Christ returns. We should not call social change the coming of the kingdom of*

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God.’ *It is right to acknowledge that society will not be fully redeemed until Christ returns.*

However, issues around our own personal morality and purity will not be brought to a satisfactory conclusion until Christ returns. Similarly, people do not come to faith unless the Spirit works in them. We cannot complete any of the most urgent works commanded in scripture ourselves – does this make our attempts any less important?

o ‘Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.’ (1 Corinthians 15:58). *This verse comes at the end of a long passage about new creation and resurrection, and suggests that we can accomplish things now that will become, in due course, part of God’s new world.*

- ‘John Stott argued that mission should not simply be equated with evangelism. Instead, we should speak of the total mission of the church, including both evangelism and social concern... They argued that repentance was not just a moral or a spiritual change, but a total

³ change

of life. It had implications and these could not be denied.’

- ‘Evangelism is the most basic and radical ministry possible to a human being... But as we have

⁴ seen, doing justice is

inseparably connected to preaching grace.’ Both of these quotes indicate a strong connection between the grace and repentance that form the spine of our salvation narrative, and the justice that ought to become a part of our lives as a response.

- ‘The result of both real evangelism and real doing of justice is the restoration of the image of the only true God in the world. The image cannot be restored without naming the name and telling the story of the one true creator God; so all serious efforts for justice must be connected to evangelism. And that image cannot be restored without God’s own image bearers taking up their true identity and calling and having the capacity to fulfill that calling; so evangelism must be connected to efforts to create the conditions where every image

⁵ bearer can experience full dignity and

agency.’ Focusing on the restoration of God’s image makes injustice and idolatry very interlinked – both introduce false images that distort the truth about God and about God’s good world.

Integral Mission

- ‘The world and our hearts are broken. Jesus’ life, death and resurrection was an infinitely costly rescue operation to restore justice to the oppressed and marginalized, physical wholeness to the diseased and dying, community to the isolated and lonely, and spiritual joy and connection to those isolated from God. To be a Christian today is to become part of that operation... The story of the gospel makes sense of our moral obligation and our belief in the reality of justice, so Christians do restorative and distributive justice whenever they can. The story of the gospel makes sense of our indelible religiousness, so Christians do evangelism, pointing the way to forgiveness and reconciliation with God through Jesus. The gospel makes sense of our profoundly relational character, so Christians work sacrificially to strengthen human communities around them, as well as the Christian community, the church. The gospel story also makes sense of our delight in the presence of beauty, so Christians become stewards

of the material world, from those who cultivate the natural creation through science and gardening to those who give themselves to artistic endeavours, all knowing why these things are necessary for human flourishing.’

²₃ Tim Chester, *Good News to the Poor*

Tim Chester, *Good News to the Poor*

⁴₅ Timothy Keller, *Generous Justice*

Andy Crouch, *Playing God*

⁶ Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God*

- ‘Applied to the mission of the church, this means that we must work in the present for he advance signs of that eventual state of affairs when God is ‘all in all’, when his kingdom has come and his will is done ‘on earth as in heaven’. This will of course be radically different from the kind of work we would engage in if our sole task was to save souls for a disembodied heaven... It will also be significantly different from the kind of work we might undertake if our sole task was to forget any God-dimension at all and to try to simply make life better within the continuation of the world as it is.’¹ *Both of these quotes point to a mission that binds evangelism and justice together as God’s restorative plan unfolds.*

Scope of Justice

- ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’ (Matthew 25:40). *Who is Jesus referring to when he talks of ‘brothers’ in this instance?*
 - ‘Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.’ (Matthew 12:50). *This could suggest to us that Matthew 25 only refers to ministry among fellow believers.*
- ‘Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.’ (Galatians 6:10). *This would seem to support our interpretation of Matthew 25 as only referring to fellow believers. We are called to do social justice, but serving fellow believers first. However, it would be a mistake to think that this dilutes our obligation to ‘do justice’. If we had a commandment that said, ‘do not murder, especially not your fellow believers’, we would not take this as license to murder non-believers. Neither should we take this as license to ignore justice for all, particularly in the context of such a clear mandate throughout scripture to engage with social justice. Let’s look at several other passages that suggest a wide scope of justice.*
- ‘Do not mistreat an alien or oppress him, for you were aliens in Egypt.’ (Exodus 22:21).
 - ‘The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself.’ (Leviticus 19:34). *The spirit of the law in this case indicates that we do not only look after ‘our own’, but that we extend mercy to all.*
- ‘But a Samaritan, as he travelled, came to where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him.’ (Luke 10:33). *The parable of the Good Samaritan seems to have been told specifically to reject the idea that there are limits on who ‘love your neighbour as yourself’ applies to.*

¹ Tom Wright, *Surprised by Hope*

Refining the Argument

We've covered a lot here. It's good to have thought about all of this in a lot of depth, but it can sometimes be useful to have a quick, memorable way of framing our argument about why social justice is an important part of Christian life. Like any good sermon, we have broken this down into three alliterative points.

Commands

God commands us to do justice, and we ought to do what God commands. This is where it is worth memorising some of the verses above. (Ex 22:21-27, Lev 19:9-10, Numbers 15:15, Deut 15:1-5, Psa 82:3-4, Prov 31:8-9, Isa 58:6-7, Jer 22:3, Mat 19:21, Luke 10:33-36, James 2:15-17). There are constant commands through scripture to consider justice. God tells us to look after the quartet of the vulnerable – the poor, the widow, the orphan and the alien. He tells us to loose the chains of injustice; he tells us to show our faith by what we do; he tells that whatever we do for others we do for him.

This is the most straightforward introduction to the biblical call to justice – God tells us to do justice, so we should do justice. However, many of the commands might seem inapplicable – gleaning laws, for example, might not apply to the majority of us who don't own fields – so we can't follow that command. For others, people might take issue with the context – they might suggest that some of the OT commands are no longer applicable, or they might suggest that many of these commands were to Israel, a theocracy the like of which we do not live in today. Some of these issues can be straightened about by reference to other commands (e.g. Daniel 4:27 is a command to do justice in a non-theocratic regime) but it can also be helpful to view these commands in the context of God's character and God's creation.

Character

God commands us to do justice because God is a just God. The commands are an outworking of God's character. We see this attested to in the Psalms and prophets (Psa 33:5, 113:7-8, 140:12, Isa 1, 58, Amos 5:24, Micah 6:8), as well as seeing it demonstrated in the life of Jesus and the early church (Mat 23:23, Luke 4:18-19, Acts 2:44-47, 4:34-35). God cares about justice because He is just. He wants us to do justice because He is just. What does it mean to *be* just, to have a just character? We know that the ultimate word for 'justice', 'tzedek', is all about the restoration of relationships between us and God, and us and others. We also know that God is a Trinitarian, fundamentally relational God, who exists in perfect relationship with Himself for all eternity. So if justice is about good, perfect relationships, then God is a just God, since God is the epitome of good, perfect relationships.

Therefore, if some commands to do justice are not directly applicable to our context, this does not change the overall call to justice. If we are seeking to be more Christ-like, and to display more of God in our own characters, we will become more just. Indeed, many people claim to feel a deep and passionate sense of justice and of right and wrong – as people made in God's image, we can make sense of these feelings. To engage with justice is to appreciate God's character, and to step more fully into the Christ-like character that we seek to uphold in ourselves. So we can do justice because God is a just God, and because God commands us to do justice.

Creation

God commands us to do justice because God is a Just God, and this is all connected with his plan for creation. There are many arguments in favour of doing justice right at the beginning of Genesis – God creates the world out of love and cares greatly for it (therefore we should too); human beings are given responsibility for stewarding over creation (so to take our God-given role seriously we must uphold justice); human beings are made in God's image and is 'very good' (therefore we must uphold justice in order to value people as God does).

This point about doing justice because of God's creation goes beyond the beginning of Genesis, right through to the end of Revelation. After the fall breaks our relationships with God, each other, and creation, God puts into motion what Tim Keller calls 'an infinitely costly rescue operation to restore justice to the oppressed and marginalized, physical wholeness to the diseased and dying, community to the isolated and lonely, and spiritual joy and connection to those isolated from God.' Jesus' life, death and resurrection are at the centre of this mission, and the renewal and restoration of creation will come at the end of it. We can join in with that operation now, and 1 Corinthians 15:58 tells us that our 'labour in the Lord is not in vain.' To do justice now is eschatologically prophetic – it points us towards a future in which God will reconcile all things to himself, and where the reign of God, inaugurated by Jesus, will be fully realised.

Conclusion

God's call to justice takes us beyond giving to each what they are due, encompasses his unconditional grace and compassion, and ultimately calls us to seek a world in which relationships between humans, and between us and God, are completely reconciled. We see thousands of verses in the Bible that teach us about justice, many of which directly command us to seek justice and to stand with the poor, the orphan, the widow and the alien. These commands reflect the just character of God, and point to His love of humanity and creation, and His mission to restore it to how He always intended it to be. If we want to join that mission, we must engage with justice.