

Justice

“All His ways are justice . . . just and right is He” (Deuteronomy 32:4)

Progressives (the so-called “woke”) clamor for “social justice.” They presume to know what justice is, but only because most of Western civilization is based on the Church’s teaching of biblical values. As Creator and sovereign Ruler over all humanity, God alone has the right and authority to determine what justice is. But by ignoring God and His Word, the progressives’ concern is phony. Progressives believe, for example, justice teaches that the end justifies the means; so if lies, violence, or deceit are needed to attain their ideological goal, well, so be it! Hey, that isn’t “justice,” it’s lust for power. In the name of justice, progressives claim that persons in need of some benefit may be denied that benefit (rationing of medical care, for example) for the supposed benefit of an abstract impersonal group (“society”). That actually *repudiates* justice. Justice is always personal. The very concept of justice requires the assumption of the equal worth of all persons. We’re all equal because of *creation*. If creation is denied, which all modern seculars do, appeals to “justice” are simply contrived. In a world that came into existence by randomly occurring natural processes, as progressives all (foolishly) suppose, there can be no such thing as “justice.” Or right or wrong. In today’s parlance, justice is an abused and misunderstood concept.

Justice is adherence to God’s revealed right standard for how He relates to us and we to others. The word overlaps in meaning with righteousness because both involve a moral standard that originates with God. Justice, though, tends to have more of a legal connotation than righteousness. For example, God’s punishment of wrong-doers and rewarding those who do right is justice. But in both the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures, the same words can be translated either way into English. Both justice and righteousness are used to describe God and how we’re to pattern our lives after Him, both socially and personally. In Hebrew, however, there is also another word, *mishpat*, that is used over four hundred times in the O.T. and is almost always translated as justice. God states that *mishpat* is one of His chief attributes (Job 40:8). The word usually refers to God’s sovereign rule over the affairs of men. But it also means that God deals fairly with His human creatures. Again, we’re to pattern our lives after God, so doing justice or being just is also enjoined on us.

Justice lies between the lines of much of the New Testament yet, as I observe the preaching and praxis in American churches and the lives of Christians today, the concept of justice seems to be absent, completely and inexcusably absent. It’s as if all that matters is that God loves us. So we need to think about justice.

The revealed standard of God’s justice is the Law of Moses in the Pentateuch. Ignoring it, the Church dwells in superficiality. The Israelites of O.T. times were saved by faith in God’s promises. They were expected to obey the Law to be pleasing to God. We today have the strange idea that the Law of Moses can be ignored because it’s not for the Church. Wrong! The Law of Moses reveals what justice and righteousness are and how we are to live. A few parts of the Law have been brought into the N.T., but it behooves believers to know the Law because it informs our sanctification.

I have compiled the clearest examples of what justice is from the Pentateuch, and tried to put an applicational principle to each. Following is the result of my study. I encourage readers to look up all these references and meditate on them.

TEXT	DESCRIPTION	PRINCIPLE
Exodus 21:1-11	Limits on keeping servants	Necessity of personal freedom
21:12-17	5 Capital offense crimes	Capital punishment enjoined
21:18-32	5 Personal injuries	Protection from personal violence; punishment limited to match damage done; responsibility for injuries to others; personhood of slaves valued
21:33-36	Injuries due to negligence	Responsibility for harm to others
22: 1-15	Recompense for theft or loss of property	Property rights protected
22:16-17	Recompense for loss of virginity	Protection of marriage
22:18-20	3 Capital offense crimes	Capital punishment enjoined
22:21-27	Compassion for underprivileged groups	Protection of rights of and responsibility for weak and vulnerable people

22:28	Respect God and the king	Respect those in authority
23: 1-9	Pursuit of truth; assistance for even lost/burdened animals	Truth, justice and mercy enjoined
23:10-12	Provision for the poor; rest for workers	Generosity enjoined; protection of rights of workers
Leviticus 5:1	Requirement to supply testimony	Responsibility for justice lies with everyone
19:9	Provision for the poor	Protection of rights of and need to show mercy to weak and vulnerable people
19:10-18	Various prohibitions on hating neighbors; pursue truth; fairness to workers; considerate of disabled; concern for safety of others	Truth, and love in practical ways enjoined
19:32-34	Respect elderly and aliens	Protection of rights of vulnerable and underprivileged
19:35-36	Honesty in business dealings	Protection of property rights; truth enjoined
24:17-22	Punishment commensurate with crime	Severity of punishment limited
25:14-34	Equitable prices for leasing land and retention of land rights	Protection of right to own land
25:35-38	Lend without interest to help poor	Protection of rights of and mercy for weak and vulnerable
25:39-55	Limits on keeping servants	Necessity of personal freedom
Numbers 5:5-10	Recompense for unspecified wrongs	Necessity of unhindered fellowship
27:1-11	Inheritance laws	Right to own land
35:6-15	Cities of refuge	Protection of innocent life
35:16-34	Defining and prosecuting murder	Sanctity of life
Deuteronomy 4:41-43	Cities of refuge	Protection of innocent life
15:1-18	Sabbatical year: Release from debt and from servanthood	Extravagant generosity enjoined; protection of rights of poor people; necessity to keep wealth diffused
16:18-20	Magistrates to execute justice	Need to interpret acts ethically and establish justice beyond what is in Law; need for societal order
17:6	At least 2 witnesses needed	Protection of accused; need to establish truth
17:8-13	Referral of legal matters; Respect judges	Need to interpret acts ethically and establish justice; need for societal order
19:1-13	Cities of refuge	Protection of innocent life
19:14	Observe land boundaries	Protection of right to hold property
19:15-21	At least 2 witnesses needed; Identify and punish perjurers	Protection of accused; need to establish truth
21:1-9	Guilt exists even though no guilty person	Sanctity of life; homicide is crime against God and against the Land; (?Corporate solidarity)
21:10-14	Dignity for women war captives	Protection of rights of vulnerable from violence/abuse
21:15-17	Inheritance rights	Order in succession of property
21:18-21	Another capital crime	Capital punishment enjoined
21:22	Removal of corpse from tree	Respect for human dignity
22:1-3	Concern for others' property	Protection of property rights; love of neighbor

22:4	Concern for fallen animal	Mercy and helpfulness enjoined; kindness for neighbor
22:8	Concern for safety of others (railing)	Protection of life; avoid potential of harm coming to others
22:13-29	Protection from defamation, sexual impurity, rape	Sanctity of marriage
23:15-16	Asylum for fugitive slaves	Mercy on oppressed enjoined
23:19-20	Lend without interest to brother	Helpfulness to weak enjoined; alleviate plight of poor
23:21-23	Avoid reckless vows; Need to keep promises	Sanctity of commitments
23:24-25	Privilege of satisfying immediate hunger with another's produce	Protection of life and basic needs
24:1-5	Limitation on divorce and re-marriage, protection of new marriage	Sanctity of marriage
24:6	Limitation on security for a debt	Generosity enjoined; protection of livelihood of weak and vulnerable
24:7	Another capital crime (kidnapping)	Protection of personal freedom
24:10-13	Limitation on taking security for a debt	Generosity enjoined; protection of dignity of weak and vulnerable
24:14-15	Payment of workers daily	Protect needs of weak and vulnerable
24:16	Capital punishment of criminal only	Personal responsibility for crime
24:17-22	Concern for needs of orphans, widows, and aliens	Protection of weak and vulnerable
24:17a	Justice even for aliens	Protection of rights of all people
25:1-3	Limitation on corporal punishment	Protection of dignity of all people, even criminals; punishment proportional to crime
25:4	Working ox may feed	Kindness to animals; protection of rights of laborers
25:5-10	Levirate marriage	Perpetuation of social order; retention of property in families
25:11-12	Immodesty stopping a fight	Need to maintain sexual modesty
25:13-16	Accurate and honest weights, measures	Truthfulness enjoined; protection of property rights

The principles identified here are, for the most part, universally applicable, even though the Law was given to the unique people of Israel. Much of the justice legislation is casuistic, that is, specific cases are presented with the intention that the principles involved then would inform ethical analysis of other specific cases. Thus in Deuteronomy 22:8, there's the situation of placing railings around rooftops to prevent people on the roof from falling off. The principle of exercising care to protect people from harm in potentially dangerous situations is evident; and this principle can *and should* control countless other situations, even in today's modern life. Identifying what principle each text intends is challenging, though, and has to be done thoughtfully. Some issues in doing this kind of exercise might include the following:

– Justice in the Law is not merely to control wrong-doing. Justice includes positive acts of kindness, mercy, generosity, and concern for the disadvantaged and underprivileged. Thus the commandments can be stated negatively or positively. Forbidding an evil implies that a good is commanded. "Thou shalt not kill," for example, means that we are obligated to aid our neighbor, to hold his life as precious. This too suggests that universal principles extracted from passages may have broad application.

– Israel is not a nation but an extended family: the children of Jacob through Isaac, through Abraham. All Israelites, , can be understood as brothers and sisters, having a common bond and mutual love and interests. They were not to be individualistic and self-seeking. The same is true for the Church: we are a unity of believers regardless of our station in life, race, nation of origin, etc. Laws referring to relationships thus are as pertinent to us as to ancient Israelites.

– Israelites didn't simply occupy a certain territory; they were given holy land by God. Living in that land was conditioned on obedience to the God who gave it. The Church has an abiding interest in that Land, although it has no actual land to occupy. Interpreting land-specific legislation therefore demands careful thought. Furthermore, Israel was a theocracy, so there was no separation of the sacred from the profane. The sacred and the profane were wholly mingled or, better, there was no such duality; *all* was sacred. That's why the legislation involving personal and social duties are mixed in with laws for worship. And it's why some legislation is specific for Israel and not included in my survey above.

– Also, a major theme of the Law is ritual cleanness and uncleanness. Those purity laws also are mixed throughout along with the justice laws. There's considerable overlap of justice and purity legislation because God cares not only about what we do but what kind of person we are. Some laws that seem to deal with justice, such as capital crimes (Deut. 13:6-11 and 17:2-7) I would classify as purity laws, so they aren't in the table. In the O.T., the purity laws functioned to teach that humans were contaminated with sin and guilt; the revelation of what Christ would accomplish to deal with that was yet future. We in the church who, in Christ, have unrestricted access to a holy God should be more obsessed with personal holiness than the Law intended for Israelites.

– Recurring principles, as evident in the table, include maintenance of human dignity, protection of life, property rights, protection of the weak and vulnerable, the necessity of truth, mercy and generosity, sanctity of marriage and holiness regarding sexuality, and the maintenance of social order. These could be categorized as matters of justice or of righteousness. The overlap between justice and righteousness should be evident: the Israelites obeying these laws would fulfill God's righteousness and live a just life. In other words, justice means more than fairness, equality, a just distribution of goods and resources, etc. It means also being righteous. Righteousness is how we rightly interact with others, to meet their needs and to enrich their lives. The Law of Moses makes no distinction between practicing justice and righteousness. The issues of justice and righteousness, by the way, are later rehearsed in the Prophets because of Israel's failures. Examples of injustice abound in those prophetic writings for our instruction. Let us not repeat Israel's failures!

Justice legislation is sourced entirely in God: "For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing. And you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt" (Deuteronomy 10:17-18). God Himself is the source of justice. In His holiness, omniscience and wisdom, He knows certain moral truths, and He holds us accountable to conform to those truths in our dealings with people and by our actions. He sees to it that what is morally right – *as He determines it* – occurs in His creation.

Justice is essential because of sin. Had evil never entered God's creation, this attribute of God might never have needed to be revealed or expressed. But sin demands that God exercise judgment. With corruption of the human race by sin, a tension exists between God's love for humanity and His just demands. That tension is resolved, as Paul explains in his Epistle to the Romans, in the Gospel. Because the Son bore the wrath that sin rightly deserves, God is free to love His creatures while remaining just. In the New Testament, and in most churches during this Age, this aspect of God's justice, called in theology justification, predominates. But that's not the extent of justice! *Justice is to characterize our lives.* As God's specially-endowed creatures, heightened by our relationship with God thru Christ, it's our *duty* to know what justice requires and to fulfill it. That's why I present the 50 or so Pentateuchal texts in the above table.

Jesus' teaching, "From whom much has been given, much is required" (Luke 12:48b) exemplifies God's justice. Followers of Christ are in view; they have been given great privileges, so they have correspondingly great responsibilities. Thus the mini-parable in Chapter 17 ends with, "We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty" (verse 10b). Luke then strategically and with theological brilliance places the conversion of Zaccheus as the climax of Jesus' ministry, just prior to entering Jerusalem to go to the cross (Luke 19:1-10). Zaccheus shows us what the appropriate faith response to Jesus is, transformation of the person: he was a sinful tax collector but now his chief repentant concern is justice. He will generously make restitution for the wrongs he did, in the way that God mandated in the Law. It is God's will to care about others.

Loyalty and obedience owed to someone are acts of justice. That's why love of the world is so wicked in 1 John 2:15; worldliness is disloyalty to God and is therefore an injustice. The same holds for idolatry. Love of the world, love of idols, and disobedience impugn God; they say essentially that God is not good, that He's not owed loyalty. Because we've been given a measure of freedom to choose whose voice we listen to, God's or some other voice, justice demands we be

held accountable. That is why the *bema* judgment seat of Christ awaits all believers. God's love for us doesn't relieve us of the responsibility to obey Him or be loyal – even to the point of death. Though we have difficulty harmonizing love and justice, they are a perfect unity in God; all His attributes are expressions of His infinitely perfect Person.

All the apostles' teaching ministry to the churches is an expression of justice. Intercessory prayer for the sick, the poor, the oppressed and the persecuted expresses justice. Sharing, and that generously, of what we have with those in need is an act of justice. Texts such as 1 Corinthians 12:25-26 are based on justice. The so-called "hard" sayings of Jesus in the Gospels, such as Matthew 10:39 and 16:24, are fraught with justice because God has condemned the world and all humanity, and it's only those who are in Christ who will survive judgment. The Day of the Lord and the Great White Throne judgments will be God's penultimate and then ultimate expressions of justice. It's worth re-reading the New Testament to see how extensively justice lies beneath its surface.

The entire Book of Acts is the Holy Spirit expressing justice: Believers in Christ take the Gospel of salvation by faith in Christ to the Gentiles because God loves all His creatures equally. Fairness *demand*s evangelizing the lost. Anyone not in Christ must face a wrathful righteous Judge; justice demands it. Satan brazenly carried out an act of cosmic injustice using deceit to steal from God His beloved human creatures to make them slaves to sin and to himself. Reaching out to the lost with the Gospel to retrieve them for God reverses that injustice. There's no greater practice of justice than Gospel outreach. The Church's indifference to personal evangelism is an appalling lack of concern about justice.

Although the command, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself," seems to be about love, it really originates in justice. Because of creation, we're all related to each other. Therefore we're all equal in God's eyes. Inequalities are injustices. God has permitted us all, equally, to use the resources He's made available. Whatever we have comes from Him as a gift. The parable of the rich man and Lazarus, also in Luke (16:19ff), illustrates God's demand for us to mimic His justice. How we use what wealth we have been given is a penetrating and critical test of our commitment to justice. "Sell everything you have and give to the poor," Jesus' admonition to a wealthy ruler (Luke 18:22), illustrates the failure of a leader of Israel to commit to God's justice. Forgiving others, even our enemies, the wrongs they do to us also may not seem like justice but rather an act of love. But it is justice in that deserved retribution is passed on to God to carry out at a later time: "'Vengeance is mine; I will repay' says the Lord."

Outsiders are disgusted with Christians in America today. I hear their complaints. They say we're self-absorbed, narrow-minded and intolerant if not bigoted people. Well, maybe. But it's true that we have turned Christianity into a private, or personal, religion. We express our religion on Sunday mornings in the safety of a church building. We know little and care less of God's demand for sanctification. By default, therefore, our sin nature is in control and it results in indifference to others. Who in the evangelical churches cares about the welfare of our black brethren in the inner city? Do they have needs we can meet? Do we care about the millions of refugees now being re-settled in our cities, from lands where missionaries dare not enter? Shouldn't they hear the Gospel message too? Our problem isn't just lack of love (although it's certainly that); it's unconcern about justice – the same justice that caused our Savior to go to the hideous Roman cross to give us the blessings of salvation. Moses warned the people of Israel, and the author of Hebrews warned his Christian readers, that God is to be feared. Why? Because He's a God of justice.

Admittedly, justice in the Scriptures poses problems. Why did Sodom and Gomorrah have to be destroyed? Was it just of God to command the annihilation of the Canaanites? These are issues of theodicy, and though there are answers in Christian apologetics, we must be in awe of God. The Book of Job deals trenchantly with justice: Why did Job have to suffer so horribly even though he was righteous? The book ends with no answer other than God saying, essentially, "Trust Me." Let's be honest: Where did evil come from? Why does there have to be evil? Why did there need to be a Satan? Why tests? There are no easy answers to these questions, and in the end we need simply to wait for God to resolve them in His time and in His way. Justice is God's peculiar work. But what has been revealed about God's just demands, and there's ample revelation here, we must devote ourselves to obediently fulfill.

We inhabit a sin-saturated world. It's a sad, dreadful place. And for most of this world's inhabitants, life is difficult and sad. History is a tragic story of wars, disasters, violence, and other horrors. Into the mix add ignorance and superstitions and deceptive beliefs, and weep. This isn't God's good creation. There wasn't supposed to be sorrow, suffering and death. In perfect justice, things have to be made right. And one day in the future, they will be, when Christ returns and establishes His Millennial Kingdom. And beyond that, a totally new kind of existence awaits, one of supreme blessing, joy and love, an endless era of *shalom*. In perfect justice, God will see to it that it happens.