



SESSION ONE

WHAT IS BIBLICAL JUSTICE?

A THEOLOGY OF JUSTICE

"Authentic mercy requires justice. That is why World Renew considers justice and mercy to be inseparable for achieving the shalom that God intended for all relationships between people and God, their neighbours, and creation."

-Ida Kaastra Mutoigo, Co-director World Renew

"It's not just about doing justice, this journey is also about allowing the work of justice to change us. In other words, we not only seek justice as we follow Jesus, but we seek to live justly. Our calling is not simply to change the world but perhaps as important, our calling is to be changed ourselves."

-Eugene Cho

DEFINITIONS

BIBLICAL JUSTICE

The state of wholeness due all of God's creation.
Justice is required for shalom.

SHALOM

Hebrew word for peace, completeness, and wholeness.
Where there is justice, there will be shalom.

PRIMARY JUSTICE

One type of justice found in Scripture, referring to the violation of rights due all of creation by mere fact of being created by God.

REACTIVE JUSTICE

Another type of justice in Scripture, defined as giving what is due in response to a violation of primary justice; most often used in reference to the judicial system.

YEAR OF JUBILEE

Every 50 years, the Israelites were to partake in a year of celebration and liberation. They would restore lands, property, and property rights to original owners, and slaves would be sent home to their families (Leviticus 25).

THE LIMITS OF “JUSTICE”

BY KIM HUNT

A remote town in Burkina Faso struggles to address the most basic needs of the community. There is little water available to grow crops to feed the people. The nearest health clinic is more than 50 miles away, and a doctor visits only sporadically. There is no school in town, and the closest one is too far away for students to travel there. The local church tries to provide basic education for the children, but their efforts are restricted because the church's capacity is too limited to serve as a fully functional educational facility.

A community church in the United States connects with the local church in Burkina Faso because they are part of the same denomination. They pull together a team of 15 passionate and able people to organize a justice trip—recently rebranded from a “short-term mission” trip. They raise thousands of dollars, fly thousands of miles, and arrive to help. They work tirelessly alongside the Burkina community, building a school. For 10 days, they engage in fellowship, pray, and work alongside one another building what will be the community's first school. The American team leaves with heavy hearts, knowing that their new friends will continue to struggle, but also hopeful that the opportunity for education will open doors for the future generation.

They pray more, they give more to missions, but some wonder why justice feels so incomplete.

The Burkina community resumes life. The community has a beautiful new school building for the children near the center of town. However, there is no teacher to teach at the school, no food in the children's stomachs to help them concentrate, and no doctors to treat the sickness that comes from drinking unsafe water.

Thousands of miles away, the church in the U.S. shares photos and stories from their justice trip. As time passes, they struggle to figure out how to live justly and support their friends in Burkina Faso. They pray more and they give more to missions. But some wonder why justice feels so incomplete. Perhaps, they wonder, it wasn't a “justice” trip after all.

GOD LOVES JUSTICE

BY NICHOLAS WOLTERSTORFF

There is a clear way of thinking about justice in the Scriptures—and what those writings say about justice is an inextricable component of the message. **Pull out justice, and everything unravels.**

Some of the skeptics of justice in Scripture are secularists who have gotten the impression that Christianity is all about love and not about justice. A good many of the skeptics are Christians who are committed to interpreting Scripture solely through the lens of love. And then there are those who concede that Scripture speaks of justice but assume that it refers to kings and courts in the administration of justice. When I say that justice is an inextricable component of the biblical message, I have in mind primary justice.

PRIMARY & REACTIVE

There are two different kinds of justice in Scripture: primary justice and reactive justice.

Reactive justice punishes the wrongdoer, condemns the wrongdoer, is perhaps angry with the wrongdoer, and so forth—reacting to one's wrongdoing. Reactive justice renders justice to a wrongdoer.

What that implies, obviously, is that reactive justice is relevant when ~~there~~ someone has treated another person unjustly. And what that implies, in turn, is that **reactive justice cannot be the only kind of justice.** There has to be another kind of justice, a kind of justice such that, when someone violates this other kind of justice and is thus a wrongdoer, reactive justice becomes relevant.

I am going to call it **primary justice.**

Reactive justice becomes relevant when there has been a violation of primary justice.

God loves justice. God has a heart for justice. God is devoted to justice. So it comes as no surprise that God says to: "Seek justice; do justice; let justice roll down like waters; imitate me in loving justice." But is God speaking of reactive justice, reserved for courts, kings, and judges, or primary justice, which applies to all people? I believe that, in many cases, these Scriptures are speaking of primary justice.

MISHPAT & TSEDEQA

The Hebrew word in the Old Testament that is usually translated into English as “justice” is ^{mishpat}~~mishpat~~. The term is often paired with **tsedeqa**, typically translated as “righteousness.” Together, they are often translated as “justice and righteousness” in the Old Testament and simply “righteousness” in the New Testament. My own sense is that, when the rhetorical context permits, **tsedeqa** is better rendered into present-day English as the right thing, going right, or doing right. The word “righteous” is almost never used anymore in ordinary speech, and when it is, it suggests a person intensely preoccupied with his own moral character who has few sins to his debit. The connotation is self-righteousness. **The pairing of ^{mishpat}~~mishpat~~ and tsedeqa is better translated as “primary justice” or simply “justice” than as “justice and righteousness” or simply “righteousness”.**

Such a reading of Scripture would require us to read Amos 5:24 and Micah 6:8 as applying to all people, not simply kings and judges. Additionally, this reading of Scripture would mean that Jesus blessed those who “hunger and thirst for justice.” Once again, pull out justice and everything unravels.

God loves the pair **mishpat** and **tsedeqa**, primary justice. But why?

Scripture teaches that what God wants for God’s human family is what the OT writers called, in Hebrew, shalom. Shalom is almost always translated as “peace” in our English Bibles. I think that is a very poor translation. Shalom is much more than peace. Shalom is flourishing. What God desires for us is that we flourish in all dimensions of our existence.

In the absence of justice, we are not truly flourishing; in the absence of justice, shalom is impaired.

And now for the point relevant to our purposes here: when you read what the biblical writers say about shalom, it soon becomes clear that shalom requires justice. **In the absence of justice, we are not truly flourishing; in the absence of justice, shalom is impaired.** Shalom goes beyond justice but always includes it. Justice is, you might say, the ground floor of shalom. So once again, why does God love justice? Because God loves shalom, and shalom includes justice.

When the kingdom of God has come in its fullness, there will be no breaches of primary justice and hence no reactive justice; all justice will be primary justice. **You and I are to image God by also having a heart for justice.**

ISAIAH 61

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What is God's definition of justice?
 2. Why do you think Jesus quoted this passage from Isaiah in his first sermon in Luke 4:18?
 3. In the absence of the Year of Jubilee, how do we ensure a "reset" to undo the structural and personal sin that perpetuates injustice?
 4. What is God saying to you, and what are you going to do about it?
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TOGETHER

How have you defined justice in the past? As a small group, create a practical and biblical definition of justice. Use the essay, your own experiences and ideas, and Scripture. You'll use this definition for the rest of your time journeying together.

SOLO WORK

Read Luke 4:16-21. With a knowledge of Jesus' work displayed in the Gospels and the context of God's desire for justice detailed in Isaiah 61, explain Jesus' words, "The Scripture you've just heard has been fulfilled this very day!"

- How does Jesus' work on earth fulfill Isaiah 61?
- How is this session's message and discussion challenging you? Are you one who knows God but has resisted justice? Are you much more comfortable with justice but have resisted God?

Journal about this. Be vulnerable. Be open.
This is between you and God.

PRAYER

Lord, you know my heart. If I have claimed to know you but have resisted seeking justice, forgive me. If I have passionately sought justice but been detached from you, draw me near to you. Help me recognize your Spirit in me and respond to your call to seek justice.