

Justice P3

Jesus & His Mission of Justice

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Jon: Hey, this is Jon from The Bible Project. Today we're going to continue our conversation on biblical justice. There are two terms in the Bible, justice, and righteousness, and they're coupled together when talking about Bible's view of a just society.

What it looks like is pretty clear. It's a society that takes care of the vulnerable, specifically the widow, the orphan, the poor, and the immigrant, or what theologians have called the quartet of the vulnerable. In this episode, we're going to look at Jesus and how he carries this rich tradition of biblical justice forward.

Tim: Jesus comes on to the scene, embodies this prophetic vision of mishpat. He's constantly moving towards the vulnerable and including them first. The Gospel of Luke intentionally turns up the volume on that part of Jesus's mission as good news for the poor. It's a mishpat for poor.

Jon: We're going to talk about Jesus, his mission of justice, and why it's crucial for us to think of humans as being made in the image of God. Here we go.

How does this come to its climax in Jesus? That's what we haven't talked about.

Tim: No, no, we haven't even talked about Jesus. Maybe I can just do a quick breeze through what I think the storyline could be like.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: In the way the Bible works as a unified story, all of this is rooted in humans as the image of God.

Jon: The ones who are supposed to be ruling the world on God's people?

Tim: Yeah. What makes a human different from praying mantis, in Annie Dillard's terms?

Jon: Many things?

Tim: Yeah, there's a lot of things. But in terms of the Bible's vision of what humans are, humans uniquely are the divine image representations of God appointed to be responsible and steward and rule over the world and its resources in a

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way that no other species has proved capable. Even though many other species of creatures are more powerful than we are.

Jon: They don't have the intelligence.

Tim: Yeah, they don't have the brain.

Jon: The prefrontal quartets.

Tim: That's right. The biblical vision of justice and right relationship, underneath it all, is what's going on and pages 1 and 2 of the Bible with humans have...How we treat each other is supposed to be different than how praying mantises treat each other. It's because of the image...You have Genesis 1—

Jon: Praying mantises are the ones where the female eats the husband, right?

Tim: I know. I was just thinking about this.

Jon: After mating.

Tim: Where this comes out and page 1 is "let us make humanity on our image, let them rule over the creatures" and that kind of thing. Humans are God's image. They represent God and are responsible. But where that comes out actually is in chapter 9 of Genesis. This thing about the sacred value of life in chapter 9 where after getting off the boat, Noah and his family, God recommissioned Noah as a new Adam. It's like creation's been washed and renewed, and Noah is blessed and gets the same commission as humanity on page 1.

Except there's a couple things different and one of them is the ideal humanity from Noah onwards doesn't have to be vegan. Ideal humanity is vegan on pages 1 and 2. It's the vision, again, of a world where for me to exist, another creature doesn't have to die. Another animal. You just eat plants on pages 1 and 2.

Jon: But without bacteria and viruses and whatever.

Tim: I'm just telling the story.

Jon: But Genesis 1 and 2 doesn't say, "Don't eat animals."

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- Tim: Yes, yes. It says, "I've given you every plant and seed-bearing tree."
- Jon: By excluding animals from that list?
- Tim: Correct. That's correct. The ideal vision is a vegan diet where you live off what the land produces.
- Jon: You got to make sure you get a whole protein out of those nuts and fruits through.
- Tim: That's right.
- Jon: Some nuts, yeah. Complete protein.
- Tim: That's right. But when Noah gets recommissioned as the new humanity, there's a provision made for eating animals. Then there's a clarification made saying, "But not humans. Not humans." Then this is a little poetic line. "Whoever sheds the human's blood, by humans his blood shall be shed for in the image of God He made humanity."
- Jon: I want to look this up. Genesis 9:5-6.
- Jon: He says, "Don't eat humans."
- Tim: No, no, no. He repeats where he gives to humans on page 1.
- Jon: "God blessed Noah and his sons, saying, 'Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth.'" That's repeating Genesis 2.
- Tim: Yeah.
- Jon: "The fear and dread of you will fall on all the beasts of the earth, and on all the birds in the sky, on every creature that moves along the ground, and on all the fish in the sea; they are given into your hands. Everything that lives and moves about will be food for you." So this is the new thing?
- Tim: Yeah. I give it all to you just as I gave you the plants.
- Jon: "Just as I give you the plants, cool, now you can eat the animals." Well, I never noticed that. Now you're off your vegan diet. "But you must not eat meat that has its lifeblood still in it." Which is like a kosher thing, right?

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Tim: Yeah.

Jon: "And your lifeblood I will surely demand an accounting." So like—

Tim: For humans.

Jon: So if a human dies, someone's going to be held responsible.

Tim: Then you get a little palm to unpack it. Whoever sheds human blood by human, their blood shall be shed.

Jon: I see.

Tim: Why? Why is killing an animal to eat it different than killing a human? For in the image of God, he made humans. So animal rights activists who seek mishpat for vulnerable animals have had a difficult time.

Jon: This isn't a great passage.

Tim: What he's saying isn't, therefore, go destroy all living creatures. That's ridiculous.

Jon: He does say that they will fear and dread you. Like a deer, he fears and dreads you. But your cattle they like you. They are hanging out.

Tim: That's a good point.

Jon: Your pig becomes your friend.

Tim: I did not grow up on a farm.

Jon: Me neither. But I hear pigs are very intelligent animals.

Tim: The point is, in Genesis 9, the value of human life is seen as having a sacred transcended dignity that a human being who takes the life of another human is very different than squishing a praying mantis. And that you're actually wrong in God. You're wrong God when you harm your animal. Remember that proverb about the wise man takes care of his animal? Because that's a part of God's creation and good world.

Jon: There's never a moment where you can kill a person for your own sustenance or preservation but you can with an animal?

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- Tim: That seems to be the point here. And why is it? What's the rationale underneath that?
- Jon: Because of the image.
- Tim: The image of God. Here's what's important is that this is a uniquely Jewish Christian tradition, an idea that is not derived from nature.
- Jon: Sure.
- Tim: It's also unique in the history of human civilization. You can go to the great ethical thinkers of ancient Greece, Aristotle. His whole argument is, there are some humans who are more valuable than others, and by nature, some humans are meant to be slaves and be ruled by the reasonable and the rational.
- Jon: That's not even an ancient thing.
- Tim: Totally. Yeah, right. All humans are created equal, except the ones who aren't white Europeans.
- Jon: Exactly. And women.
- Tim: Yes, and women. Exactly. Even societies that say that they honor the Bible have found this a difficult vision to live up to or have just straight up not actually been consistent. They've been inconsistent. This is a radical contribution of the Hebrew Bible to human history is the concept of a mishpat, a right, the inherent possession of every single human regardless of...I mean it's page 1 of the Bible where God—
- Jon: That's easy to take for granted that all humans deserve—
- Tim: Yeah, that's right. In our culture, it's now easy to take for granted because of our cultural amnesia.
- Jon: But why should you care about every human the same? In reality, we don't. I mean, I can't care as much for an orphanage full of kids in Romania as I do care about my own kids. I just can't. Maybe that's not what we're talking about. Because I'm not going to go and kill them.

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Tim: No, I don't think that's necessarily what it's talking about. But it is saying this is the rationale underneath all of this, mishpat and tzedakah, and it's that human life is sacred and precious. Every single human life.

So within my community and realms of influence, under the wise administration of my life and resources, there are going to be people, however, whose mishpat is neglected, their image-bearing value is neglected, and God, a follower of Jesus, who takes it seriously will try to notice that and be a part of with whatever is at their disposal to change that for the people.

There's one other time the image of God's explicitly drawn on in the same way in the New Testament. It's in the letter of James, where he talks about the way we talk with people, talk to people in James chapter 3.

It's that great line where it says with the same mouth, we say, Praise God and thank you, God for everything, and then we go and speak poorly of somebody we don't like. He says, "With the same time we bless God, and with it, we curse humans who have been made in the image of God." This should not be happening.

It's the same rationale. There's actually no human who deserves to be cursed. You can say what somebody's doing is wrong, but to slander and devalue them and treat them as less than human, that's a violation of their dignity. Even people that you don't like, that's a really uniquely biblical idea.

Jon: Image of God.

Tim: That's the idea where every human has a mishpat before God - A right and a value.

[00:13:10]

Tim: From here, then, it's kind of a familiar territory. When human beings redefine good and evil, they take the knowledge of good and evil into their own hands, they tend to create societies where I sought the mishpat of me and my group at the expense of the mishpat of you and your group, and whatever. That's just human history. That's Genesis 1 to 11.

So God singles out a family. There's a line in the Abraham stories that haven't got the attention they deserve. It's in chapter 18. What God says about

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Abraham, "Surely Abraham will become a great and mighty nation, and in him, all the nations of the earth will be blessed. Won't they? For I have chosen him so that he may command his children and household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing tzedakah and mishpat - righteousness and justice - so that the Lord may bring upon Abraham what he's spoken about him."

What's the promise? That all nations will be restored to divine blessing. How? Through this family living and among the nations but have different value system than Egypt, or Babylon, and its righteousness and justice. Here the definition is assumed all this broad meaning that we've talked about.

Then they experienced themselves God's own righteousness and justice when he redeems them out of slavery in Egypt. They became the vulnerable. God showed righteousness and justice for the oppressed on their behalf. Therefore, He revealed to them the laws of the Torah that were embodiments of mishpat and tzedakah to create the family of Abraham that does Mishpat and tzedakah. And that all the nations would look and say, "Wow, what an incredibly wise nation that does mishpat and tzedakah?" Israel doesn't do it. Here's where the profits come into play.

Here's what I thought was interesting. When we get to the prophets in the wisdom literature is that the prophets are pointing out all these ways that Israelites are perpetrating injustice. And they talk about the new messianic leader is going to come and so on. But I thought this was this quote from Bruce Waltke. This is from his commentary on Proverbs. He's an incredible Hebrew Bible scholar. He wrote two fat volumes on proverbs that are so legit. The first volume begins—

Jon: This is the excitement you get about large books most of the times. You actually show me the size of them with your hands and then your eyes kind of glaze over and your mouth drops a little bit. It's pretty funny.

Tim: The first hundred pages it's just these really cool essays on all these biblical vocabulary words, like wisdom, foolishness.

He has these two great essays on righteousness and justice in the book of Proverbs. Anyway, he summarizes it with this great line. He says, "If you read the book of Proverbs, here's what the common denominator really see about

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the righteous, the tzadiyk. The righteous are those who are willing to disadvantage themselves to the advantage of their community.

Jon: We call those suckers. Right? No.

Tim: "The wicked in proverbs, m'rusha [SP], the wicked, those are who are willing to disadvantage the community to advantage themselves.

Jon: So funny I was really into poker for a while.

Tim: I remember that.

Jon: You remember that?

Tim: Well, I remember I was living in Wisconsin in that period.

Jon: I probably was playing a little bit when you moved back too. I don't know at what point I stopped.

Tim: You had poker nights with your friends?

Jon: No, I would go and play tournaments.

Tim: Oh, what?

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: I did not know that. I just thought you would do Poker Nights.

Jon: No. Poker Nights got boring because my friends don't like to really play poker. It just becomes a social thing, which I should care about. But what I was really loving was just the competition, the game of poker.

In the game of poker, it's all about taking advantage of people when they make mistakes. You have to. That's how you win. When someone makes a mistake, you take advantage of that person, and you get some of their chips. It's all about collecting their chips over time. It's not necessarily the cards that you get dealt, it's about finding the opportunities to take advantage of someone.

You can lie. It's bluffing. You're supposed to. You're supposed to pretend you have a better hand than you do. The person who comes and doesn't know

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what they're doing, you call them the fish. They are the fish. They are the sucker. And every table, if you don't know the fish is, you are the fish.

It's always being aware of, who can I take advantage of, and how am I going to take advantage of them. Then when people are strong, and you know it's going to be hard to take advantage of them, then you try to find their weaknesses. You're like, "Okay, what's this person's weakness? Do they have a tell where you know what they might have by their body language or by their actions? Do they have certain habit just in the way that they bend or different things? And take advantage of that? It's so interesting. It's like the opposite of mishpat. Is why I bring it up.

Tim: That's interesting. Do you think that that's different than any other sport?

Jon: Oh, yeah, it's very different.

Tim: Okay. It's like when you're playing basketball, you're also trying to exploit your opponent's weaknesses and take advantage, right?

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Is it different because it's just you as opposed to a team?

Jon: It is true. It's very individual. There's no teamwork.

Tim: It's usually for money as opposed to—

Jon: I don't know. There's something ruthless about it.

Tim: It feels different. I'm just trying to understand what the difference is.

Jon: Between that and basketball?

Tim: Yes.

Jon: Because in basketball, you want to fool your opponent. You want them to think you'll dribble left, and you dribble right. You want to fake them out and realize, "Oh, they don't have a good jump shot, so I'm going to make them have to take the jump shot. I don't know.

But for whatever reason, reading that, the righteous are those who are willing to disadvantage themselves to the advantage of their community, if you go

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into a poker room with that mentality, you're going to lose. Everyone else can take advantage of you.

I think that's the mentality that maybe when that gets applied then to life. Like life is the poker room and I've got to take the chips that I can, and I can't show weakness, or I'm going to be taken advantage of. To tell someone to go into the situation and be willing to disadvantaged yourself for the advantage of the community is just so backwards.

Tim: Yeah, that's true. The reason why I included that is because I think this is our ticket to the way this video works and the way it connects to Jesus. Really it's like the perfect segue. Because Jesus comes onto the scene and he, first of all, embodies this prophetic vision of mishpat, he's constantly moving towards the vulnerable, and including them first within...The Gospel of Luke intentionally turns up the volume on that part of Jesus's mission is good news for the poor. It's mishpat for the poor.

Think of this parable where if you throw luncheon, if you're a part of the kingdom of God, and you throw a dinner—

Jon: Don't invite people that can pay you back.

Tim: Invite the people who actually can't benefit you at all you. Which means it actually is all for your disadvantage because you're paying for the meal. Jesus says that's what it is.

When Jesus confronts the Pharisees in the Gospel of Luke chapter 11, he says, "You really precise that paying a tithe, not just your produce, but love your mint plants, you disregard justice, and the love of God." These are things you should be doing without neglecting the others.

So justice and love are two sides of the same coin for Jesus. But we already knew that from Mica to do, justice and love mercy in terms of looking for those who are the vulnerable. That's the Jesus part. So it's both he embodied that vision of mishpat in His Kingdom of God mission.

Then, the moment of the cross is precisely the moment where in Jesus, God disadvantages himself while He also accomplishes recompense. The cross becomes this moment the judge becomes the judged. Or you could say it's where both definitions of justice perfectly meet together at the cross where

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God brings a just recompense on human evil, but He provides that by embodying mishpat for the poor by taking it himself.

So the cross is where God's love and justice meet together. I think that's a really compelling, interesting and beautiful idea.

[00:24:19]

Tim: Then where you go from there since our goal was to think about response in some way, is followers of Jesus find themselves as people who have received this loving mishpat, where our plight of frail, mortal, morally corrupt humans has been recognized, it's been addressed through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Jon: It's our exodus.

Tim: It's our exodus. He looked on us in our slavery to ourselves, and even deeper mysterious evil powers that I don't claim to understand and he provided a way forward himself. And so the people of Jesus should be at the forefront of creating this kind of mishpat, especially for the vulnerable. You can see how the arc goes there. So it's the image of God, every human has inherent sacred right and value.

The way human history works, we disregard that God singled out a family. I mean, this has the arc of many of our theme videos.

Jon: I'm wondering when these are going get tiring to people?

Tim: Yeah, I know. That's a good question. Part of it is the biblical story. We're just trying to think about it from different angles. I thought about that as I was writing this.

Jon: Oh, did you? I don't think we're there, but it is something that came to both our minds. That's cool.

Tim: If we can build these two senses of justice, and then the Jesus and His death and resurrection, where both of them come together, we're God's way of confronting evil and stopping it is also his means of showing generous attention to the vulnerable.

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Jon: The two ideas are very stitched together. Almost so much so like is it essentially the same thing. Like does our evil always result in oppression? Is that just a natural result? Or is there a kind of evil that wouldn't...?

Tim: Well, it's interesting. When you're talking about the Bernie Madoff example interview, even the person at the center of all that wasn't just the embodiment of evil. Somehow our insecurities, mistakes, even noble efforts can all get twisted and turned into create great injustice.

Jon: Yeah, totally.

Tim: That's a part of the human condition that we need help. We need to figure that out. Somebody needs to help us figure that out. The story of the Bible is that Jesus is the only way out of that plight by what he did on our behalf, but also by the new way of living that he embodied.

Jon: Here, I mean, we're talking about what he did on our behalf as an example, but then it also in some way releases us. From whatever the draw is, whatever that spiritual evil is that traps us in that, this video really isn't going to get into that.

Tim: No.

Jon: Which is interesting. Oh, you said we might do this video. It would be the the chaos monster. That's the connecting piece to like, what's the salvation, what am I being freed from so that now I can live a life more of righteousness and justice?

Because I could think of how I might be able to do it without Jesus, like, "Well, I'm just going to care more about the poor and I'm going to care more about my consumer habits and the climate, all these different things that might all affect things and to make my life all about that. And I don't need Jesus in that equation." Maybe I'll be like, "Yeah, it's a cool moral example of having done that, but what's the actual empowerment?" But that's a different video it seems like.

Tim: Yeah, it is. I think this is mostly about painting this biblical definition of justice as being primarily oriented towards the vulnerable, how that's rooted in the image of God and then violated, and that God's on a mission to create a people who live differently, and that Jesus is the one who perfectly leading

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the bodies and trailblazers the way forward into that by taking the ultimate consequences of injustice, therefore, rendering recompense on human justice. But then also in that same act, seeking out the mishpat for the vulnerable.

Jon: Thanks for listening to this episode of The Bible Project podcast. We're going to do a question and response episode next on the Biblical justice, so we need your questions.

What you can do is you can record your question on your phone or computer and then email it to us support@jointhebibleproject.com. Try to keep the question to, I don't know 15, 20 seconds or less. Don't forget to give us your name and where you're from. Again, the email is support@jointhebibleproject.com.

We need these questions by Wednesday, October 25th. So send them on over and we'll get as many as we can into that next episode of the podcast.

Our video on justice is releasing next Thursday the 26th, so keep a lookout for that. We're really proud of it. Thanks for being a part of this with us.