



Justice

Study Notes

Introduction

What is justice, and who gets to define it? In our video Justice, we explore what the Bible says about justice and discover how it’s rooted in the storyline that leads to Jesus. Go deeper into the ideas from the video with these study notes.

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Justice and Righteousness

Our English word “justice” is from the Latin adjective “*iustus*,” which means “upright, just, or fair,” and the Latin noun “*iustitia*,” which means “fairness, legal, or right.” Justice refers to right relations between people that act as a standard for evaluating between good and bad behavior and fair and unfair actions, and for determining the fair consequences of such behavior.

Justice is a complex, contested concept in our own culture. Harvard Law professor Michael Sandel wrote a book called *Justice: What’s the Right Thing to Do?* In his book, Sandel argues that the moral discourse about justice in our culture is in a state of confusion because different groups appeal to that word but mean different things by it. Let’s look at a few different views of justice.

- Maximizing welfare view: Justice is the action that brings the greatest good and reduces the greatest harm to the greatest number of people.
- Respecting freedom view: Justice is whatever creates the greatest level of respect for the rights and freedoms of each individual to live how they choose.
- **Promoting virtue view:** Justice is what directs people to act as they ought to, in accordance with moral virtue.

The biblical vision of justice actually taps into all three of these views, but with a slightly different emphasis. One of the most famous biblical statements about justice comes from the book of Micah.

Micah 6:8

*God has told you, O human, what is good;
And what does the Lord require of you
But to do **justice**, to love **mercy**,
And to walk humbly with your God?*

As we seek to understand biblical justice, we should be aware of our tendency to impose our modern ethical or political categories onto the Bible and use bits and pieces of Scripture to support our particular view of justice.

Mishpat: The Hebrew Word for Justice

Mishpat refers to the actions we take to create a community of justice so that **all people are treated fairly**.

In the context of the prophet Micah, he was exposing the leaders of Israelite cities and their unjust actions. These wealthy leaders owned land and ran the economy, but they cared more about power and money than justice. They were guilty of buying land from lower income landowners through bullying (Mic. 2:2) and changing land boundaries (Mic. 2:4-5, 9). They bribed local judges and prophets (Mic. 3) and rigged the weights and measures in their favor (Mic. 6:10-11).

For Micah, existing as a human before God means to **do what is right and just** and to **love mercy**, that is, to do the right things for the right reason on behalf of others.

Two Modes of Biblical Justice

1. Retributive/Recompense

This mode of justice is like the punishment/reward system in a court of law, ensuring there is recompense, repayment, or acquittal for just or unjust behavior. If you steal five dollars, you have to pay back five dollars. If you're wrongly accused of stealing five dollars, you should not have to pay, and you should even be repaid for the trouble of being accused.

Deuteronomy 25:1

*If there is a dispute between men and they go to **court** (lit. to the mishpat, place of justice), and the judges (Heb. shophetim) decide their case, and they declare the innocent to be in the right, and they will declare the guilty to be in the wrong.*

2. Restorative

This mode of justice is about making sure that everyone in the community is treated fairly and given what they are due. It's about granting people rights by changing unjust practices or laws.

For example, in Deuteronomy 18:1-3, the Levites didn't inherit land because they served all the tribes by working in the temple. And so the other tribes were to give a tithe (one tenth) of their produce as offerings in the temple. This temple tax is called the Levites' *mishpat* ("their right," see also Deut. 21:17 "right of the firstborn").

In Israel, there was another group in their society who had unique *mishpat*: the quartet of the vulnerable, meaning the widow, orphan, immigrant, and the poor.

Zechariah 7:9-10

*Thus has the Lord of hosts said, "Dispense true justice (**mishpat**) and practice **mercy** and compassion each to his brother; and do not oppress the **widow** or the **orphan**, the **immigrant** or the **poor** ..."*

Ancient Israel was a network of patriarchal tribal farming communities working on ancestral land. If you didn't own land (because you were an immigrant or poor), or if you didn't have a male landowner as your guardian (because you were a widow or orphan), you didn't have the basic social web of support and protection. *Mishpat* was key to caring for these vulnerable people and honoring their rights as members of the community.

Today, the equivalent of the Bible's quartet of the vulnerable would be people like refugees, migrant workers, unhoused people, the elderly, or single parents. In Israel, making sure these people have adequate resources and access to support is not called charity; it's called *mishpat*, and it is motivated by mercy. Restorative justice on behalf of the poor accounts for the vast majority of uses of *mishpat* in the Bible.

Where Does Justice Come From?

Justice is a key part of the biblical story, with the ideas of both retributive and restorative justice being introduced in the early chapters of Genesis. We also get a picture of what an unjust society looks like in Babel/Babylon—they have no regard for the vulnerable or moral uprightness. But the idea of justice, as it applies to God's people, takes more concrete shape in the Exodus narrative.

Exodus 1-2: Portrait of Babylon and Egypt's Enslavement of Israel

The portrait of Egypt's injustice is even more developed than Babylon's.

- **Political** (Exod. 1:8-10): The Israelites in Egypt are a refugee community, an ethnic minority who sought political asylum in a time of famine (see Gen. 40-50).
 - "With a change of dynasty came a change of policy. Exodus 1 portrays how vulnerable they were to being made the target of irrational fear, political cunning, and unjust discrimination. They had no political freedom or voice within the Egyptian state, even though they had grown in numbers ... This is a story with modern echoes." — Christopher J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God*, 268
- **Economic** (Exod. 1:11-14): The Israelites are exploited for slave labor. Rather than being able to use the granted land for their own benefit (under the original arrangement, see Gen. 47), their labor is used for Egyptian agriculture and construction projects.
 - "An ethnic minority does the dirty work for the king of Egypt. The modern echoes continue." — Christopher J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God*, 269
- **Social** (Exod. 1:15-22): Because enslavement doesn't actually kill the Israelites, Pharaoh decrees a state-sponsored genocide, inciting all his people to a murderous campaign against Israelite babies.

The Two Modes of Justice (*Mishpat*) in the Exodus Story

- **Restorative:** Justice is about liberating the oppressed by restoring their dignity and opportunity to flourish.
 - Exodus 6:6: “Say, therefore, to the sons of Israel, ‘I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from their bondage. I will also redeem you with an outstretched arm and with **great acts of justice.**’”
- **Retributive:** Justice is about confronting evil by bringing consequences and recompense.
 - Exodus 7:4: “When Pharaoh does not listen to you, then I will lay my hand on Egypt and bring out my hosts, my people the sons of Israel, from the land of Egypt by **great acts of justice.**”

Exodus 14 is the salvation story of the Hebrew Bible—a picture of God’s response to human injustice and his care for the vulnerable and oppressed.

We see God’s character and heart for justice celebrated in the poem that follows the account. Exodus 15 is a poetic celebration of God as the ultimate justice-bringer for the vulnerable. And this isn’t simply an abstract trait. The Israelites know God to be this way because of the events of the exodus.

The laws that God gives to Israel at Mount Sinai are then an embodiment of “wise justice” before the nations.

Deuteronomy 4:5-7

*See, I have taught you statutes and judgments just as the Lord my God commanded me, that you should do thus in the land where you are entering to possess it. So keep and do them, for **this is your wisdom and your understanding** in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes and say, Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people. For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as is the Lord our God whenever we call on him? Or what great nation is there that has statutes and **judgments as righteous** as this whole law which I am setting before you today?*

This vision of a just society was foundational to Israel’s laws. The laws have a clear focus on preemptively identifying those most vulnerable to Babylon/Egypt-style exploitative tendencies and preventing those inequalities.

- Exodus 21:26-27: A slave who is beaten goes free.
- Exodus 23:9: Do not allow the oppression of the immigrant “since you know the life of an immigrant, for you were immigrants in the land of Egypt.”
- Leviticus 19:9-10: “Now when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very corners of your field, nor shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest. Nor shall you glean your vineyard, nor shall you gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the needy and for the stranger. I am the Lord your God.”
- Deuteronomy 15: The remission of debts every seven years, the release of slaves every seven years and generosity toward the poor.

Not only do the laws represent wise justice, they are also a revelation of God's own character (Deut. 10:17-19) and a symbolic re-enactment of the Exodus story (Deut. 6:20-24). In following these laws, the people would be reminded of God's heart for justice and their rescue from oppression.

Deuteronomy 10:17-19

*For the LORD your God is the God of gods and the Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God who does not show partiality nor take a bribe. **He executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and shows his love for the immigrant** by giving him food and clothing. **So you should show your love for the immigrant**, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.*

Deuteronomy 6:20-24

*When your son asks you in time to come, saying, "What are these testimonies and statutes and judgments (Heb. **mishpatim**) which the Lord our God commanded you?" Then you shall say to your son, "**We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, and the Lord brought us from Egypt with a mighty hand.** Moreover, the Lord showed great and distressing signs and wonders before our eyes against Egypt, Pharaoh and all his household; **he brought us out from there in order to bring us in, to give us the land** which he had sworn to our fathers. This is why the Lord commanded us to observe all these statutes ..."*

The Character of God and *Mishpat*

The character of the God of Israel is fundamentally oriented toward *mishpat*, and this is reflected throughout the biblical story.

Psalms 146:7-9

*The LORD God, the one who upholds justice (Heb. **mishpat**) for the oppressed, and gives food to the hungry.
The LORD sets the prisoners free.
The LORD opens the eyes of the blind;
the LORD raises up those who are bowed down;
the LORD loves the righteous;
the LORD protects the immigrant;
he supports the fatherless and the widow,
but he thwarts the way of the wicked.*

The story of the exodus reveals something fundamental about the character of God. Gustavo Gutierrez, a well-known Peruvian Catholic theologian, wrote about "God's preferential option for the poor" in his book *A Theology of Liberation*. But this phrase is often misunderstood; it does not mean that God disregards justice if someone is poor. Leviticus 18:15 says, "You shall not distort justice, you shall not be partial to the poor or show favoritism to the wealthy; rather, you are to render justice rightly for your neighbor." This means that Exodus reveals God's special awareness of the plight of the socially vulnerable, and so the biblical calls to render justice for the poor far outnumber passages like Leviticus 18:15.

In *Justice: Rights and Wrongs*, Nicholas Wolterstorff says the biblical authors are very aware that “lower classes are not only disproportionately *vulnerable* to injustice, but are disproportionately actual victims of injustice. In human history, injustice is not equally distributed.” This explains the huge call to justice for the poor in the Hebrew Bible.

Proverbs 31:8-9

*Open your mouth for those who
cannot speak for themselves,
for the rights of those passing away.
Open your mouth, do right justice,
and defend the rights of the afflicted and needy.*

Jeremiah 9:23-24

*Thus says the LORD, “Let not a wise man boast of his **wisdom**,
and let not the mighty man boast of his **might**, let not a rich
man boast of his **riches**; but let him who boasts boast of this,
that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who
exercises **mercy, justice** and **righteousness** on earth; for I
delight in these things,” declares the LORD.*

Tsedeqah: The Hebrew Word for Righteousness

Tsedeqah is a Hebrew word that is closely linked with *mishpat*. *Tsedeqah* is usually translated as “righteousness.” The English word “righteousness” is from the Old English *rihtwis*, which means “just, upright, virtuous.”

The meaning of *tsedeqah* is an ethical standard of right relationship. Biblical scholar J. Alec Motyer defines its use as “right with God and therefore committed to putting right all other relationships in life,” and “to do right by someone.”

Tsedeqah is the standard of right relationship between all people. And *mishpat* is the action you take to create the standard of *tsedeqah*. Biblical righteousness is about right relationships in day-to-day conduct in family, work, and community.

Job 29 offers the most complete definition of biblical *tsedeqah*.

Job 29:12-17

*I delivered the poor who cried for help,
and the orphan who had no helper.
The blessing of the one ready to perish came upon me,
and I made the widow's heart sing for joy.
I put on **tsedeqah**, and it clothed me;
mishpat was like a robe and a turban.
I was eyes to the blind
and feet to the lame.
I was a father to the needy,
and I investigated the case which I did not know.
I broke the jaws of the wicked
and snatched the prey from his teeth.*

When these words appear as a pair, “justice and righteousness,” they almost always overlap with our modern concepts of charity, generosity, and social justice (Moshe Weinfeld, *Social Justice in Ancient Israel*). Let's look to this example from Ezekiel to better understand this.

Ezekiel 18:5-9

*But if a man is righteous and practices **mishpat** and **tsedeqah** ... if he doesn't oppress anyone, but restores to the debtor his pledge, does not commit robbery, but gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with clothing ... then he will live.*

This is a key biblical idea because the messianic hope of the prophets is for a king who will perfectly bring *tsedeqah umishpat* (righteousness and justice).

Isaiah 11:1-5

*Then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse,
and a branch from his roots will bear fruit.
The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and strength,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.
And he will delight in the fear of the LORD,
and he will not **judge** by what his eyes see,
nor make a decision by what his ears hear;
but with **righteousness** he will **judge** the poor,
and decide with **fairness** for the afflicted of the earth;
and he will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.
Also righteousness will be the belt about his loins,
and faithfulness the belt about his waist.*

In his book *Social Justice in Ancient Israel*, Moshe Weinfeld says, “the concept of ‘justice and righteousness’ in the Bible is closely associated with *mercy* and *loving-kindness*, with acts of ameliorating the situation of the destitute. This involves not simply by just treatment in court, but also by the elimination of exploitation and oppression and those who perpetrate them.”

Righteousness and justice (*tsedeqah umishpat*) is always something demanded of those who have resources and influence (usually kings or city leaders). They are to act with righteousness and justice on behalf of those who have neither.

Justice and Righteousness in the Biblical Narrative

So how do the connected concepts of justice and righteousness show up in the biblical story? These ideas are reflected all throughout the Bible. In fact, they drive the conflict of the whole story—a story that finds its resolution in Jesus, who restores justice and righteousness to the world. Let's look at how these concepts shape the major themes of the Bible.

1. The Image of God

Humanity is an image of the divine appointed to rule the world on God's behalf and uphold his ideas of righteousness and justice.

Genesis 1:26-27

Then God said, "Let us make humanity in our image, according to our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

The ideal in Genesis 1-2 defines what is "just." Genesis 1 says humans are the image of God, enjoying "good" as provided and defined by the Creator. Male and female together are 'adam' (humanity), and together they are to rule over creation, subduing the land and releasing its potential. Genesis 2 says humans work as a unified pair to release the potential of the garden.

Humans represent God to creation, and they have inherent, sacred worth. Genesis 9:6 says, "Whoever sheds a human's blood, by a human his blood shall be shed, for in the image of God, he made humanity."

James 3:9 says, "With the same tongue we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God ... This should not happen!"

This is a uniquely Jewish-Christian contribution to the history of human civilization. For example, the entire Greek-Roman political system was built on the concept that all humans are not created equal. Aristotle argued that only rational humans are equal, which did not include slaves, therefore making slavery "just" from that context.

According to the Bible, besides having inherent sacred worth, humans are also divinely appointed stewards of the world. However, this doesn't mean humans can do whatever they want as if they owned the world. Psalm 24:1 says "The earth is the Lord's and everything in it." This means God gave humans delegated authority over the world's resources but not ownership.

2. Humanity Redefines Good and Evil

When humans redefine good and evil in Genesis 3, they assert their rights over and above the rights of other humans. Now humans seek the resources and well-being of themselves and their own community to the disadvantage of others.

Genesis 3-11 offers us the fundamental biblical portrait of the human condition and a robust, multi-faceted portrait of injustice.

- Genesis 3: Humans have a choice when it comes to “knowing good and evil.” They choose to “take” this knowing for themselves, leading to gender inequality (Gen. 3:16).
- Genesis 4: Cain does “good” in his own eyes, leading to jealousy and murder, which spreads evil to more humans (such as Lemek, who kills for honor and revenge).
- Genesis 6: Humans corrupt the land through their violence.
- Genesis 11: Babylon is an example of the ways self-exaltation can quickly spiral out of control—the desire to rise to divine status.

3. God’s Covenant With Abraham

God made a covenant with Abraham, choosing his family as the vehicle through which he would form a nation that lived differently than the surrounding people groups and reflected his nature.

Genesis 18:17-19

*The LORD said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, since Abraham will surely become a great and mighty nation, and in him all the nations of the earth will be blessed? For **I have chosen him, so that** he may command his children and his household after him to keep **the way of the LORD** by doing **righteousness and justice**, so that the Lord may bring upon Abraham what he has spoken about him.”*

In Genesis 12-50, the family of Abraham is chosen to become a counter-Babylon.

- Genesis 12: They are called to be a blessing to the nations.
- Genesis 15: They are to “do right by” Yahweh through their faith.
- Genesis 18: They are to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice.
- This is the first time the words “justice” and “righteousness” appear in the Bible.
 - Righteousness (Hebrew *tsedeq* / *tsedeqah*): doing right by someone; a standard of **right relationship** between people.

“In order for an individual to be righteous, it means that of necessity he or she must exist and live in a manner which allows him or her to respond correctly in the values of the relationship (spouse, parent, judge, neighbor, etc.)... In essence “righteousness” is not simply an objective norm which is present within a society and which must be kept, but rather it is a concept which derives its meaning from the relationship in which it finds itself. Right judging, right governing, right worshiping, and generosity are all covenantal activities and so righteous, despite their diversity.” — Hemchand Gossai, *Justice, Righteousness and the Social Critique of the Eighth-Century Israelite Prophets*, 55-56

4. Israel Enslaved

Israel ends up enslaved in Egypt, and God performs justice for the oppressed.

Exodus 6:5-6

*I have heard the groaning of the sons of Israel, because the Egyptians are holding them in bondage, and I have remembered my covenant. Say, therefore, to the sons of Israel, “I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from their bondage. I will also redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great **acts of justice** (Heb. shephatim).”*

5. The Law

God reveals the covenant laws to push Israel in the direction of greater justice and righteousness.

Deuteronomy 4:5-8

*See, I have taught you statutes and **judgments** just as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should do thus in the land where you are entering to possess it. So keep and do them, for that is your **wisdom** and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes and say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.” For ... what great nation is there that has statutes and **judgments** as **righteous** as this whole law which I am setting before you today?*

6. Israel Perpetuates Injustice

But Israel doesn’t follow the covenant laws, and though they were once oppressed, they become the oppressors. The biblical prophets and poets accused the Israelites of perpetrating injustice, and they pointed to a new leader who would come and embody true justice and righteousness.

Bruce Waltke, in an exhaustive study of *tsedeq* and *mishpat* in Proverbs and the Prophets, offers this summary.

“The righteous are those who are willing to disadvantage themselves to the advantage of their community; the wicked are those who are willing to disadvantage the community to advantage themselves” — Bruce Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1-15*, 96.

7. Jesus Fulfills the Just and Righteous Ideal

Jesus came to fulfill all of these ideals, moving specifically toward the quartet of the vulnerable (the widow, the orphan, the immigrant, and the poor) and included them within his family. Jesus said God's Kingdom was first of all for the poor.

Luke 14:12-14

*When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, otherwise they may also invite you in return and that will be your repayment. But when you give a reception, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, since they do not have the means to repay you; for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the **righteous**.*

Luke 11:42

*But woe to you Pharisees! For you pay tithe of mint and rue and every kind of garden herb, and yet **disregard justice and the love of God**; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others.*

8. God's Love and Justice in Jesus' Death

God's heart for love and justice, as developed throughout the Hebrew Bible, is perfectly fulfilled in Jesus' life, ministry, and sacrificial death.

- **God renders his just judgment** on corrupt Israel and humanity by a court sentence of *guilty*.
- **God judges as an act of love** by putting himself in the place of the guilty.

9. Followers of Jesus Pursue Justice and Righteousness

Followers of Jesus are judged by the love of God and found righteous through his generous grace. As a result of this grace, we should pursue biblical justice above all, which looks like putting ourselves at a disadvantage for the well-being of the vulnerable and oppressed.

In the Apostle Paul's vision of the body of Christ, the Church is a community that reenacts God's righteousness. Righteousness motivated God to faithfully fulfill his promises to Abraham and David by sending the messianic King, who died on behalf of humanity's injustice (Rom. 1-4). We see a concrete example of this in the letter to Philemon, where a slave and his master are now equals in the family of God.